Feliciano and the King of Hearts

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Feliciano and the King of Hearts

by worldwidecupcake

Summary

Chosen by the gods as the Queen of Hearts from the moment of birth, we follow Feliciano's story as he grows into royal life, learns to rule, go against age old customs, and his relationship with his husband to be, the King of Hearts.

Notes

I really like the Cardverse AU, and it saddens me to not see so many stories for Ludwig and Feliciano concerning it and it's understandable when Himaruya made Kiku the queen. But I changed that for this story and for once I can embark on it, yes. I'll be extremely slow with this one while I finish Amor Aeternus, I just had the chapter ready and wanted to give it a head start. I hope you all enjoy it!

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Four kingdoms exist in this world. Clubs, Diamonds, Spades and the focus of our story, Hearts.

The Hearts Kingdom was as proud as all the other kingdoms, with richness in culture, history and tradition. They were widely known for their dedications to the arts, shown everywhere to their landscapes and architecture. They were known for the stories of the great Romulus, a hero who had saved the four kingdoms long ago. They were also known for their sternness, for their honors in maintaining an outlook that was prideful and respectful to the other kingdoms. Their Kings and Queens were taught to show these very qualities, a couple of power and high stature that would continue to keep the kingdom with the prosperity it had never failed to withhold.

The citizens of the kingdom looked up to them, for it was their union that gave richness and life to their land, and as such were treated like the gods they worshipped and were given incredible amounts of wealth to sustain the high lifestyle that pleased them and gave them perseverance to keep doing the best for their kingdom. The Jack was in charge of making sure that the King and Queen were faithful to their people, that their jobs and their wishes were fulfilled as they hoped. They tried to keep the two together, their relationship in balance and any of the situations around them. The Jack was as needed and as powerful as the position of King and Queen, and was rightfully respected as such.

In the past, back in the days when the Kingdom of Hearts was still new and many say it was at its most prosperous, the Italian province was in charge of bearing the Kings, many of the most powerful and historic ones. But as times passed, the German province took that position, and for centuries they had bared the Kings.

The Queen could be from any of the many provinces, but for centuries, there had been no queen from the Italian province, not since Romulus's wife, Augusta.

But this year, what a turn it had been.

For the first time in centuries, a Queen had been born in Italy. The Kingdom and even others were in great celebration because a King or Queen from Italy usually meant change or a chance for new riches and great ideas for the years to come.

Augusto, the grandfather of the baby boy, proud himself, held a great ball to celebrate the baby’s birth.

The Valenti were a family of the greatest nobility in Italy, known for being the family line which held Romulus’s heritage. Thus, they had a home large enough to accommodate all the people that had come for the celebration.

People from all provinces came, as well as others from different Kingdoms. They filled the acres of their lands with colorful flags and all kinds of gifts. Chariots, horses, dragons, phoenixes, and different forms of animals came that wondered all the children that were present. Music was in the air, songs of luck, of blessings and all the joy for the baby boy.

Even with the largeness of the Valenti land, there still wasn't enough space to take in all the people who crowded outside, waiting for a turn to see the new awaiting Queen. Augusto, his daughter, Renata, and her husband made sure to attend even those outside with the best food of the province, hoping they each could entertain themselves with conversation and just the excited atmosphere from the new life that lay inside the household.

The house was prepared for the occasion, most furniture and ornaments moved aside to have more space and decorate everything with red flowers of their kingdom, as a symbol of welcoming to their newborn.

It was mostly those of nobility and of close friendship to the Valenti family who were inside, each admiring the beauty of the baby, who was now four months old, greeting with laughter at everyone who came to him.

"Oh, you're just the cutest boy I've ever laid eyes on," little Erzsébet cooed, the young princess of Clubs, who enjoyed her time with the future Hearts Queen, playing with all the toys her family brought as gifts.

"Can I pick him up, Signora Valenti?" She asked Renata, who was in conversation with Erzsébet's own mother.

She excused herself and went over to the richly decorated cradle, picking him up so lovingly and gentle, both sharing identical smiles.

"Of course, my dear." She held him to the girl, who nervously began taking him, making sure to hold him right, as the boy's own mother did.

"Be careful with his head, tightly around his body now," she guided, until Elizaveta was sure she had a good grasp of him, rocking the baby and both sharing the same laughter from when they played.

"Oh, he's the most darling, Renata," Erzsébet's mother complimented.

"Indeed he is. He will be the most beautiful Queen this kingdom has ever hard," Augusto announced loudly for all to hear, having arrive from outside, holding Renata's oldest son, and the older brother of the baby, Lovino.

"Oh, papa!" Renata seemed to scold, but deep inside her she hoped that would be the case.

She noticed the tears on Lovino's eye, plus the scrape on his knee. "Lovino, tesoro, what happened?" Confiding that Erzsébet would hold her baby well, she headed to her own father's side, wanting to hold the two year old herself, rocking and calming him from whatever hurt he went through.

The young boy wiped the tears from his eyes, settling then in the chest of his mother, wrapping his arms around her. Renata did not mind this, holding him just as tight, her hands caressing his back hoping that it would better soothe him.

“Saw one of the griffins the Diamond royals brought. He chased after it and wouldn’t leave it alone. It screeched at him after he grabbed its tails. He fell and began shouting out for me," Augusto told, a chuckle under his breath as he recalled it.

Renata couldn’t help but smile herself, her hold still as gentile as he soothed the boy for a nap.

Her own little baby boy, seeing the tears and sadness on his older brother’s face, began crying as well, loudly and one that Erzsébet could not deal with.

“Renata!” She called.

Renata, who had learned in the last few months to carry the weight of both her sons, came eagerly to take him into her arms as well. He was quickly rocked and the little baby settled his tears, also noticing the protective smile Lovino gave him. The baby laughed, kicking his legs, raising his arms, as if asking his brother to play with him.

“My precious boys," their grandfather cooed, coming close, rubbing his hand on Lovino’s hair, and caressing the baby’s cheek and little hands.

It was such a beautiful scene to watch, the guests giving their own awes, smiles erupting to even the sourest face. Only the loud bang of the entrance doors was enough to bring it to a halt.

In entered Vincenzo, the boys’ father, a panic in his olive eyes that made everyone in the room look up worriedly.

“The King!” He shouted. “King Aldrich is coming!” And the room went into frenzy.

Augusto and Renata began to hurriedly organize anything that was moved or messed from their earlier celebrating. Feliciano was placed back on his cradle, watching as people began to run around the room, standing in their best postures, fixing their suits and dresses, becoming as stiff as if they were statues. Even the Valenti family, who stood right by the cradle, went through the same sudden transformation. Only Feliciano remained as he was, moving around rather impatiently hoping to be held by his grandfather or mother again.

A large coach had arrived to the gates of the house, four majestic horses dragging it about on its trip. It stopped right before a space left empty by others who were there, a clear entry way into the Valenti household. There was silence, but also whispers, many knowing that the coach held no other than the royal family of Hearts.

The doors extended open and out came the king, in his rich wear of reds and golds, tall, stern, powerful, but with movements so graceful and admirable to the many others who swooned at his presence. Along came the great and honorable queen, with rich wear to match her husband’s majesty, then there was their daughter with her husband and two young sons.

Princess Monika's youngest baby boy, Prince Ludwig, was born with the mark, and thus, after Aldrich, would be the next one to be King, and probably the young queen's future husband. Of course he was brought along to see, Aldrich holding the one year old in his arms as he made his way, nodding and greeting to all the many that bowed to him as he walked on.

Two servants opened the grand doors for them, and Aldrich, having come here before, led his family down the known halls.

The amount of people that littered the halls halted, bowing and giving way until they finally reached the main room. Once there, everyone bowed instantly, synchronized in such a way that it was even beautiful.

"Your majesty," even Augusto had bowed and addressed him as such.

"This is a surprise," Aldrich scoffed.

Augusto was not one to greet him in such a way. In other circumstances, he would have embraced him, patted him hard on the back and laid a kiss on his cheek. But this time, he greeted him with the respect of a King, not even coming close, but only extending his arms as welcome to his home, and also presenting his family, especially the newest member, which was the reason of his travel, presence and even the celebration around them.

Each took their own time greeting one by one, until all that was missing was the young Feliciano. Aldrich, with his own grandson in his arms, moved first to the cradle where he first spotted the young boy, who stopped his fluttering to look up to the strange and serious looking man gazing at him entirely. He stayed staring for the longest time, not offering a smile, a hand or even an attack of tickles as everyone had done to him with each of their first meetings. The other young boy was just the same, staring with complete indifference, gazing away and trying to find something of better interest.

"I though you said it was a boy."

"Well, it is." Augusto felt almost insulted that he dared doubt him.

Aldrich raised an eyebrow but didn't question any further.

"He looks an awful lot like your daughter." That had perked Renata's attention, who smiled and bowed to the King once again.

Silence continued, he continuously stared on, with no words but judging eyes. The whole crowd awaited for new compliments or even insults, but nothing.

"Louis!" He called, and the Queen had come close to the cradle after having a small chat with Renata and Vincenzo.

She gazed down to the baby with the same uninterested eyes, but she was less fearsome than the two other men. It got Feliciano to laugh and smile, hands even extending to her for a touch or to even be held. Louis couldn't hold her sternness any longer. She smiled back and

even reached her hands to hold his little tiny ones, the small baby enjoying its softness and just the small attention and little act of love.

“What a darling." Finally a compliment from a Beilschmidt, the Queen more importantly. A united breath of relief filled the whole room.

Things settled and the ball continued with its earlier festiveness, even the Beilschmidts joining along in dances, chatter and drinks. The Queen had taken a fondness to the new younger Queen, having held him, granting a special blessing with magic, wishing him happiness and a long life. Wanting to spend her time with the other Valenti, she placed the baby back in its cradle, leaving it quite alone for now, all the guests distracted with other company and anything the feast offered.

Only one guest seemed intrigued enough to come close to the cradle once again, little one year old Prince Ludwig, who still did not understand why this baby was given so much attention. He hoped to stay long enough to see, gazing to the other baby boy, who smiled and craved his attention like any other. Ludwig didn’t dare touch him, wanting to prove that he would not be fazed by whatever wonder this baby had used to grab all the adults’ attention. Yet baby Feliciano continued to laugh and smile to him, hoping that his own power could work to make the young prince smile himself.

Ludwig had rested his head to the edge of the cradle, beginning to tire, wanting to be held in the arms of his mother, or his grandmother. He thought of running to them instead, better than continuing to wait for something to come from this baby.

And it happened.

All it took was a single touch against his arm, holding the other rather tightly to his spot. Ludwig looked back to the baby and was perplexed by his big eyes, which seemed to beg for him to stay, to continue giving the company that he wished. The smile, the glow, the dependence in those little fingers, had Ludwig reaching, letting their hands intertwine, Feliciano shaking it excitedly, for he finally got the attention, the smile and the new friend he wanted.

You could say that it was with this little touch that it all began.

It was important for the King and Queen to have a stable relationship from the moment they met, being as babies, children, teenagers, adults and even later on. Because of this, the Beilschmidts continued their visits for the next months, for the two future rulers to become better acquainted. Sure, both their boys couldn’t do much as babies and toddlers, but they had them be enough with each other to recognize and even call by their names to play as their speech grew. Their familiarity like their friendship began to grow, right upon the eyes of their families. Sometimes in the castle, Ludwig would beg to see his dear friend, and Feliciano went on nights crying if he didn’t see Ludwig. It was starting to become rather common that Ludwig would stay at the Valenti estate, either playing about in the fields, in the house or staying up for hours talking or reading the books Feliciano had in his room, immersed in the stories or the pictures they offered. The Valenti family didn’t even care anymore about

preparing the house for his visit or acting accordingly to a prince. Ludwig was now like another member of the family, causing the same havocs that they were all used to seeing.

It was a beautiful spring day, a bright sun with sparse clouds, all the green was at its brightest and flowers were as colorful as the very rainbow that sometimes decorated the sky. It was the ideal peaceful weather to relax, nap, read a book or enjoy a picnic from. But with the constant clank of metals bouncing across these very fields, it didn't seem like the best option.

Feliciano peeked his head from the top of a hill, hidden well under its wall, a bright red pot on his head giving him clear position, but the little four-year-old didn't know that, to him this was the best of his strategic planning, a clear victory to him and his companion.

Ludwig peeked on with him as well, spotting their target picking some tomatoes from a well grown vine.

"Do you have your sword?" Feliciano whispered to him, and Ludwig raised a broom they had taken from the kitchen.

"What about your shield?" Ludwig in turn asked, and Feliciano raised an old foam panel.

They were ready, chuckling between themselves as they began to stand up, going over the hill slowly. The armor they had whipped with strings and pans still continued to smash against themselves, creating more clanks and bonks enough to reveal themselves. Luckily, Antonio, a servant's ten-year-old son, had been distracted enough with their tomatoes to notice the little soldiers ready to form their attack.

"For Glory!"

"For Honor!

"For Riches!"

"For the Gods!"

"For Hearts!" They shouted in turns, then screaming and chasing down the hill, enough of a noise to not only catch the attention of Antonio, but also some of the gardeners that were working there in peace.

They all rolled their eyes once they noticed that it was only the prince and the young master. Antonio on the other hand panicked, dropping his basket of tomatoes and looking around him for a place to hide before they got a blow on him. Luckily, that blow never came, for both the boys had underestimated the ground still moist by the rain that had fallen on the province the days before.

Ludwig's foot was trapped by the ground, pulling him down until he landed on the big brown mess of mud. Feliciano tripped alongside and joined him, their prestigious white clothing dirtied immensely and yet the boys were still stuck hard enough, not to mention embarrass, to be able to stand or show their dirtied faces to those who had witnessed it. Many of the

gardeners had laughed but yet didn't do a thing to get close and help them, even Antonio lay in still shock, debating if he should run or help both the masters.

A maid, who had been searching for the missing pots all morning, quickly told the events to Signora Valenti. She had stopped immediately her short cooking lesson with Lovino to see if her son and the prince had been badly hurt and give them her best comforts. As she eased closer to them, making sure she herself didn't fall into the mud, she saw that there was no ailment to them, just dirty clothes, skin and hair.

They looked quite adorable trying to get out and get rid of much as they could from them, dropping their 'weapons' 'shields' and 'armor' as well. Renata giggled, helping both boys out, not minding that she got her skirt and hands dirty, steading them both on solid grass covered ground.

"Now, what kind of war has broken out for you both to send your armies?" She asked rather playfully, a pleasant smile in her face that didn't make this seem like a scold at all.

"We were addressing a crime!" Ludwig defended.

"A horrible one that needed to be paid with his life, for his disrespectfulness to the future King and Queen." It didn't sound at all menacing when it came from the mouth of a four year old.

Renata looked over to Antonio, still standing as petrified, not at all understanding what the two boys meant by that. He hadn't done anything worth of murder.

"What could have sweet Antonio done?"

"He ate the tomatoes from last week's picking!" Feliciano instantly blamed, pointing his fake sword towards him, hoping that now his mother would understand and let them avenge their home for the food taken.

Renata still wouldn't believe it.

"Did he really?" And there was silence, from both the boys as they though it over.

"We really don't know," Ludwig admitted.

"But Lovino told us so," Feliciano defended, for he knew that his older brother would always tell the truth.

Renata groaned, already preparing her scold for her older son. She then breathed in and relaxed, still having to deal with this force for now.

"Feliciano, caro mio, it wasn't Antonio, he was just as disappointed as the rest of us when it happened."

Both the boys let their weapons fall to the mud mess in disappointment, dirtying more of their fine clothe and even Renata's.

“Then who was it?” Feliciano asked.

“We’ll get him!" Ludwig proclaimed, picking up his sword again and readying himself to fight another enemy.

Renata brought them closer, cleaning what she could from both their faces with her apron.

“How about, we get you boys to take a bath and then we have some nice snacks. I’ll deal with the culprit myself.”

The boys couldn’t disagree when snacks were involved.

Chapter End Notes

EDITED: ON 07.10.2024
Just some things, doubt many will notice.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

> This story would be my focus now, so expect updates at the same pace I had with Amor Aeternus :'D I hope you all enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The boys had Renata thinking twice if it was right to give them the sugary snacks they had waiting for them in the kitchen. Even without it, already the boys were as hyper running about the house. As soon as they were bathed, given both their sleeping robes, they were already coating them in their new sweat. They ran, they extended their hands as if they could fly and touch the high ceilings, climbing over desks, sofas and even vases simply out of fun.

"Boys! Slow down!" Renata had called, but it was simply a far echo for the boys, continuing on their adventurous flight across the house.

They only stopped once they reached the kitchen, taking their seats in one of the high stools that faced the counter. It was hard for their small stature, and Vincenzo, who had been in the room having a cup of coffee and making sure Lovino didn't get burned as he cooked, had to help both the boys up, presenting them a plate of cookies and other fruits which they immediately took into their mouths. Renata arrived to the room exhausted, having to run to reach them. At least they were peacefully eating, except when they tried to talk to each other, crumbs falling on top of the counter or on their fresh new clothes. Renata groaned, but took a seat next to them anyways, noticing that the cookies they were eating were from a fresh batch, surely one Lovino had made. She took one herself and glowed at the taste.

"Amazing, carino," she complemented and Lovino smiled in appreciation, quickly going to make a new one.

"Now, Lovi, please explain to me why it was that you told your brother that it was Antonio who took the lost tomatoes?" She went straight to it, already suspecting of Lovino as he stilled, placing some bowls and ingredients on the counter before they fell to the floor.

He flushed in embarrassment and anger, tears bright on his eyes as he tried to think of a good excuse that his mother could believe.

"Because he really did! I saw him! He took a good bag from the supply closet many nights ago! I saw him! I saw him!" He jumped on the stool he stood to reach the heights of the counter, hoping from his desperation that his parents could better believe him.

"What were you doing up at night in the kitchen watching Antonio?" Vincenzo asked, a rather teasing smirk as he brought his cup to his lips.

“Be-because I, I…uh,” Lovino stuttered and blushed, looking away from them, seeing as they all grew the very same smirk his father did.

“Because you love him!” Ludwig shouted, having just finished eating a cookie.

“N-no! No I don’t!” Lovino shouted at him, only growing the more red.

“Yes you do! You’re always staring at him and you turn this red when you talk to him!” Feliciano defended Ludwig’s claim.

“You love him! You love him! You love him!” Both the boys began to sing and chant, bouncing on their seats, Renata and Vincenzo chuckling.

Lovino's red embarassment was turning to one of anger, hands gripping the wooden spoon he held and Renata knew that it was usually not a good sign. Before things turned violent, she eased both the boys and handed them more cookies to distract them.

“Love is a wonderful feeling, Lovino, you should never deny it like that,” she told him, hoping it could quench the sudden anger he grew.

It had worked, but he still pouted angrily, and he wasn’t as excited to bake now.

“Also, the tomatoes Antonio had taken that night were rotten ones that I had asked he threw away,” she cleared.

“Then who took them?” Lovino wanted to know now.

“I did actually,” and there came in his grandfather, large bags of grapes in his hold, surely from the picking he had done in the day. He placed them on the floor, stretching and enjoying from the cool air of the home after working out there under the sun.

“May I ask for what?” Renata asked, looking to him with a scold that was similar to the very ones she gave to her son and even Ludwig when they didn’t behave.

“For the lovely lady in the small cottage next to our land." Of course, another one of his many love interests.

Renata rolled her eyes. She was used to her father constantly doing these kinds of things, which in turned created havoc as the one with Ludwig and Feliciano and their vengefulness on Antonio.

“And in turn, she gave me the most wonderful vinaigrettes,” he pointed to them in a cabinet.

Renata had been wondering where he had gotten them.

Augusto went and took a cookie from the ones in the kid’s plate, but both Ludwig and Feliciano tried to stop him by hugging themselves against his large arm.

“What is this?” Augusto wondered, still trying to take it, even if he had to carry both the boys in the air, trying to get it into his mouth.

“No! You can't have one!” Feliciano shouted.

“You’re the thief that took the tomatoes! You shouldn’t be taking our cookies!" Ludwig joined, both the boys glaring.

“Ah, come on, it was just a bag of tomatoes.”

“No!” They still refused to.

“What kind of unjust tyranny are you both going to hold once your king and queen?” Augusto laughed, capturing the cookie finally into his mouth, ignoring the angry groans from the future royals.

They began their attacks of little punches that did nothing to Augusto. He only laughed, easily carrying both the little boys in each of his holds, spinning them, tickling them or blowing into their bellies. The boys couldn’t hold their anger any longer, and they quickly filled the whole room in giggles and even begs for Augusto to continue throwing them or making them fly all across the kitchen.

Augusto played with them for the remainder of the day, while Renata stayed with Lovino for the rest of his cooking, having made four batches by the end of the day, many from which Augusto, Ludwig and Feliciano took from, which ruined their appetite for when they sat down to have dinner.

With the night now above them, it was time for the boys to sleep. Ludwig was expected to leave back to the castle early in the morning.

With Ludwig’s constant visits, he even had his own bed in Feliciano’s room, which he crashed into as both the boys were lead there by Renata. They were still as active from their playing with Nonno, boisterous on their beds, jumping and going on with the things they did.

“That’s magnificent, but now, it’s time for bed,” Renata tucked them in, but it wasn’t as easy, both had their eyes wide open, as if they were expecting her to present them a whole new game to play.

She picked some thrown toys on the floor and placed them in their shelves or chest, then turning to see them chuckling at each other. They usually did that when they were plotting something. She sighed, picking up a dog doll and a St. Mark lion doll which they tended to sleep with and hold in the night.

“Ludwig, you have a long trip tomorrow. You need the rest. Don’t let Feliciano keep you up." She gave him his dog, moving some strands of blond hair from his face, placing a good night kiss to his forehead. That’s how familiar Ludwig had become in their household.

“And Feliciano." She handed him his St. Mark, not kissing him yet, but staring with an angry scowl.

Feliciano stared back with an adoring smile, cheeks reddened and big brown eyes shining. She couldn’t stand it, she leaned and took him into his arms, placing many kisses across his

face. Feliciano laughed and tried to ease himself closer, to hug as much as he could of the warmness he loved of his mother. They settled in a loving embrace, Renata rocking her baby boy against him, until Feliciano was at such a peace that she had though he had truly fallen asleep. When she placed him back on the bed, blankets over him, his head comfortable on his pillow, Feliciano's eyes widened big enough, disappointing and already missing her touch. She leaned to place her own kiss upon his forehead, looking into his eyes and pocking at his little nose.

"Sleep," she commanded, "and don't keep Ludwig awake, mio caro."

She stood and headed to the door, taking one last glance to make sure that they were both settled, with no hints of excitement.

"Gute Nacht, Ludwig," she wished him.

"Gute Nacht, Signora Valenti," Ludwig said tiredly, yawning and settling more in his pillows, covering his body well with his blankets.

"Buona Notte, Feliciano, ti voglio bene."

"Ti voglio tanto, mama." And like Ludwig, Feliciano closed his eyes and began to embrace the blankets and pillows.

Renata trusted that both would remain like this and closed the door gently behind them.

Instantly Feliciano opened a single eye, looking over to the lights that shone under the door. Once it was off and his mother's steps disappeared into the halls, he gave a little whistle. Ludwig himself instantly sat up, pulling away all the blankets. Feliciano took a book he hid under his pillow, standing and joining Ludwig in his own bed.

"What did you get?" He asked.

"It's about fruits." Feliciano easily found a good spot beside Ludwig, opening the book for both to see.

"Fruits?"

"Clubian Fruits."

"Oh!"

Clubs was the most mysterious of the four kingdoms. It was the largest and with a lot of terrain that was still unexplored. It always perked the interest of children like Ludwig and Feliciano, that tended to wonder and even create what could be lost in their forests and tall mountains. This silly book Augusto had in his library could show them more of it, an array of fruits that both had never seen before, both wondrous and…disgusting.

"Eww…" Feliciano commented, pointing to a pastel green colored fruit with large and hideous seeds all over it. It looked to be dripping, a gooey mess that was close to falling from the branch it was held in.

“Would you eat that?” Feliciano asked him.

“Never, never, never, never." To prove his point, Ludwig even shook his head fiercely.

“I would!” Feliciano glowed, proud of the daringness he showed Ludwig.

Instead of praises, it only got him a disgusted look. “You would eat anything, Feliciano,” Ludwig rolled his eyes and turned the page, hoping to find something much prettier than whatever they had just seen.

And there was, like limes and other beautiful green citruses. They spent a good amount of the night going through the entire book, never a part of them tired. Renata came to wake them the next morning, only to find them dead asleep, cuddled together in Ludwig’s bed, the book over them as proof of what they did last night. Renata didn’t know whether to huff angrily or smile at the dear hold they had of each other.

An uncle of Ludwig was getting married, and he had chosen the Italian province as the setting for his wedding. Many families were handed invitations to attend, like Feliciano’s family, who obliged in attendance. They had chosen an old church of a near village to the Valenti estate, and the very family had given the couple their fields for the feast after the ceremony. Feliciano had watched them prepare curiously, wondered at how they accommodated tables, chairs, fabrics, glasses, flowers, stones and even food to make a refine scene.

This was to be the very first wedding he would attend and he couldn’t wait to see it take place right before his eyes.

Despite his wish, Ludwig, as one of the couple’s nephews, came to the event, and when both the Prince and the young Valenti got together, no calm or concentration was expected. Throughout the silence of the ceremony, both the boys wouldn’t stop giggling, sending each other faces, playing hands games or making comments that got various hushes from their families. Hoping they would let the ceremony continue in peace, they let them run about the second floor of the church, yet with a perfect view to the altar, where the preacher continued and the couple lay before them, readying their vows and commitment.

Ludwig and Feliciano paid no mind, finding it boring, preferring to entertain themselves with whatever items they found on this floor. But the beginning of a tune halted them, a song that began with a playing of the piano, the star and lonesome tune that brought the room into calm, even the two five year olds who hadn’t sit still all throughout.

Violins and flutes joined in by a signal, truly beginning the song, a tune relaxing, enchanting, like the lullaby of a music box, belonging to the silence of the church, but also intimate to the couple that were becoming one.

The tune began to disappear, leaving the church once again in mute silence, all looking to the groom, waiting.

“I’ll journey and see beyond the lines of our kingdom,
Never a fear to be lost, never a fear to fall,
In pleasure, I will take the mysteries of what I could meet,
If you accept to be mine, my Queen.”

The groom sang, although directed to his bride, loud enough for all who were assembled to hear. The bride in turn grew a great smile. Feliciano and Ludwig, both seemed hypnotized by the music, and moved close to where the rails lay.

“No heat, no cold, will stop me of my search,
No sun, no rain to go against my strength,
Just promise me your hand,
And love me in our eternity.”

Ludwig and Feliciano were far too short, they could not lean over the rails and gaze on. They stood between the gaps, staring down, each their hands embracing a baluster. It was a good hold, for the music could be enough to have them hurdling down from the space.

“My sun, my moon, my land, my love,
I know it’s a journey you will overcome,
But I don’t need you to go so far,
I want you here to kiss me.”

It was the wife’s turn to sing, turning all to him, away from the direction she took to the front, at the altar and preacher. It was a sign that she was dedicating everything to this song, just like she was dedicating to her vows and to her soon to be husband.

“Would you want all the gold I will find for you?
Would you like the songs I will bring from afar for you?
Would you accept me as your shield?
And would you want me always by your side?”

The groom sang back to her, taking her hand in a meaningful hold, both easing just a little closer. The entire crowd could tell that the song wanted to have them truly embrace and kiss before it was told by the preacher, and it took a lot from them to not do so that instant.

“I don’t want any of the riches you will bring,
I don’t care for any of the songs,
I only want you to hold,
I only want your arms around me.”

The wife replied, and to Feliciano’s surprise, Ludwig actually continued to sing the next part, in silence with her.

“Bring me your love, your kisses, your loyalty,
Your passion, your hope, your defeat,
Your promise, your weakness, your strength,
I will keep it all in my heart.”

Feliciano stared back at him, wondering if perhaps he knew about the song, but Ludwig just seemed lost, still as curious. He truly was listening to it for the first time.

“I’ll journey and see beyond the lines of our kingdom,
Never a fear to be lost, never a fear to fall,
In pleasure, I will take the mysteries of what I could meet,
If you accept to be mine, my King.”

And Feliciano joined in the last of the melody, impressed himself that he sang readily, the tune coming from a deep part of his soul that wanted to be free with this song.

“I feel like I’ve heard this song before,” Ludwig admitted, feeling rather fearful at how well he suddenly knew it.

But the fear didn’t last, back in the Valenti estate, as the feast continued on, the boys ran across the fields, repeating the song over and over. They played and even danced to their own tune, laughing loudly, many others who were around joining them, in their own dance, smiling at the fact that the future King and Queen were already singing their song. It was a comment that had grabbed both the boy’s attention, so when dinner was served, Feliciano didn’t waste time to ask his mother.

“The song is called ‘Accept to be mine’, it was composed by your great grandfather, Romulus, carino,” she told him, taking a napkin to clean a stain that had gotten unto his cheek.

“Romulus created it for his beloved queen on the day of their wedding, and ever since it has been sung by the Kings and Queens. It’s a lovely song, isn’t it? Which is why many other couples use it as their vows."

“Do opa and oma know the song?” Ludwig asked.

“Ja,” Monika, Ludwig’s mother, pointed to the current King and Queen, Ludwig’s grandparents, who had a table all for themselves.

Although they had many food offerings, they didn’t eat as much, only taking small bites from time to time, distracted in their own conversation.

“I saw them mouthing it during the ceremony,” Gilbert, who was Ludwig’s older brother, snickered, holding a hand to his mouth to not laugh any louder.

Ludwig didn’t get why it was so funny. In his short life, his grandparents had always been united, their efforts together resulting in a good kingdom. They didn’t show their love as publicly as Augusto had been with his late wife, Helena, neither as Renata and Vincenzo, or his very own parents. Their love they only wanted showed for themselves, in private and intimate moments where they could focus on their own promise and lasting emotions.

That night, Ludwig had managed a rare glimpse of it.

The guests had already gone and all that was left was the decorations that they meant to take down the morning afterwards, when the couple was settled on their way to their honeymoon. It was late, not an hour for both the King and Queen to remain awake, alone in the dim lighting of the candles that still flickered on, still in their table, gazing as if the party was still partaking.

It was neither an hour for Ludwig and Feliciano to still be awake, but they wanted from the leftovers which they took in a basket and headed over to one of the living rooms, where they had a clear view to the backyard. They munched on fruits, small cake pieces, small pieces of chicken, and of course, whatever pasta Feliciano could find. They had been distracted well enough with their midnight snacks to notice the presence of the King and Queen. It only became obvious when they suddenly stood, but instead of returning back to the house, they took the dance floor. They spoke, not a word heard to the young boys, but they eased closer to the glass, wondering what it was that they were going to do.

They took the usual position for a waltz, and after the stare they gave each other, a rare smile from the King's mouth, a sung began, and Ludwig and Feliciano did not had to be listening to know which one it was.

"I'll journey and see beyond the lines of our kingdom,
Never a fear to be lost, never a fear to fall,
In pleasure, I will take the mysteries of what I could meet,
If you accept to be mine, my Queen."

Ludwig began to sing, quietly, a whisper, but yet just enough of a tune for the King and Queen to dance to.

"No heat, no cold, will stop me of my search,
No sun, no rain to go against my strength,
Just promise me your hand,
And love me in our eternity."

He continued on, noticing how his lips matched well with the movements his own grandfather was making, spinning about his wife across the floor, taking the solitude well, enjoying from it like no other had shown during the very liveliness of the feast.

"My sun, my moon, my land, my love,
I know it's a journey you will overcome,
But I don't need you to go so far,
I want you here to kiss me."

As the Queen's part, Feliciano began to sing it, in the same quiet tone Ludwig had taken. Ludwig admitted that Feliciano made it much beautiful. He had a voice to sing and give just anything a lively aura that could awake anything.

At the last verse, Feliciano chuckled as he turned to Ludwig, offering his hands. Ludwig didn't understand for what. It took a quick glance to the continuing dance below for him to understand. He blushed, nervous, fidgeting and even stuttering. He didn't know how to dance at all, while Feliciano has had his chance. He saw him constantly dance with Augusto. He felt

like he was going to embarrass himself, but as it was his turn to continue to sing, he forced himself to take the hand, bravely positioning them both as he saw his grandparents do. This was Feliciano, his best friend and his future companion to rule over their kingdom. He could trust him, he would show him and there was nothing to worry about.

“Would you want all the gold I will find for you?
Would you like the songs I will bring from afar for you?
Would you accept me as your shield?
And would you want me always by your side?”

And they began, taking the space of the room for their own dance. Along with the song, they filled the room in laughter, in childish energy that at points made this dance messy. But it was nothing, after all, they were simply learning. Feliciano, despite what little he knew, messed up several steps, along with Ludwig. Many times they would trip, but with each other’s help, they stood up again and continued, all until the song finished.

It ended with Ludwig’s arm tightly around Feliciano’s waist, Feliciano resting his hands upon Ludwig’s chest. They giggled, but once their eyes met, silence befall and they noticed their closeness, even the way they held to each other. Ludwig’s head leaned over Feliciano’s own and they began to laugh again, enjoying from this comfort, this growing trust, whatever that had gone through them in the silence of their stares gone.

Chapter End Notes

I based a lot of the song from ‘For the dancing and the dreaming’ from How to train your dragon 2, I though it was a nice melody that would go well with the story.

EDITED: On 8.10.2024

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Feliciano was only six years old and already he could draw a bunny with realistic strokes and shades. He could draw the grass, the flowers and even the sky behind it to complete it, as beautiful and worthy enough to be hanged, along with the expensive paintings that were hanged about his house from his ancestors. His family considered painting and drawing a hereditary talent that all Valenri possessed, and Feliciano, even if he was to be queen, was no exception.

Now Ludwig, possessed no such thing. As any other six year old, all his lines were squiggly, he painted over them and still did not understand these concepts of perspective, shading and lighting. He always felt so inferior when he drew next to Feliciano, his childish doodles in flimsy paper masterpieces, while his, garbage, things he knew the servants would throw away once they cleaned the table. He sighed as he stared at his own lonely half drawn pink bunny, while Feliciano was adding details to the clouds he drew in his own background. He really wished it wasn't raining that moment, he much preferred to be playing outside. He placed his pink crayon on the table, and settled with gazing to the clouds, a part of him hoping that some of his little…prince powers could do something to stop this storm.

Feliciano noticed his halted movements and raised his head. "What's wrong?"

"I don't want to draw anymore, I want to go outside."

"But why?" He looked to Ludwig's drawing, only a half drawn bunny, a couple of flowers and blades of grass. "It looks fine."

"No it doesn't. Yours is obviously better. Why even bother?"

This is what Feliciano disliked to see the most from Ludwig, doubt and lost to his negative thoughts. It hurt him, because he believed in him and he looked to him already like he was supposed to at a king. It was just painting, he shouldn't give up so easily to it just because of his own talent. He inched closer to Ludwig, placing a gentile hand to his shoulder.

"It really is fine, but it won't get any better if you give up like this." He gave him one of his famous sunshine smiles, always a light enough to give back Ludwig his confidence, his wishes and perseverance to continue and try. He still wouldn't dare pick up his crayon though, even now it seemed to be taunting him about the talent he did not possess.

"Come on!" With surprising strength, Feliciano pulled Ludwig back to the table, forcefully placing the crayon into his drawing hand.

"This time, I'll be helping you." He seemed extremely excited to do so.

Feliciano held a tight grip with Ludwig's hand and Ludwig let him, letting him ease to where he should paint and how much force he had to apply. Even when they switched colors to create a shade or even a gradient, Feliciano maintained the hold of his hand, and with it Ludwig began to learn, smiling and gleeful that he managed to improve his drawing, even with Feliciano leading him and always with his hold.

A maid had come to check on them and was still on her spot as he gazed at them, both the boys not knowing of her presence yet, so Feliciano continued with his lesson. It was a giggle from her than made them notice.

"Awww, look at you two, already holding hands. Beautiful little romantic seeds you both are. What a couple you will be when you are married."

They both gazed over to her curiously, wondering what she was talking about. Ludwig noticed their still joint hands and quickly let go, blushing red and rubbing them on his vest, as if to hide the proof of what the maid already saw.

"Married? We're not getting married Signora Bernadetta," Feliciano answered.

"Yeah, Feliciano is my best friend, it be too weird," Ludwig added.

She only chuckled, beginning to dust and clean some small things in the room.

"You say that now, but wait until you both grow into beautiful and handsome men," she eased and rubbed both their hairs, "you won't be able to resist each other." The boys still sat with deep confusion, looking to each other hoping that maybe the other could better explain, but no luck.

They sometimes forget that they were indeed humans like any other, who grow and will one day be as old as their parents. As so, they did not think they would even grow up to be as handsome as Signora Bernadetta said or how even the entire kingdom hoped. All they knew was their now and they believed all they had for each other was this friendship and how it would always remain.

"Besides, it's not for me or for you both to decide, it's for your parents, but I believe they will go through with it, after all, you both get along better than we ever expected." She picked some mantels to wash, bowed to the future rulers and left back to her usual duties.

The boys remained still as confused, expecting her to come back and better explain, but she never did. They once again looked to each other for explanations, but still nothing. They continued on with their drawings, Feliciano still trying to show Ludwig, although now they were too nervous to once again have the hold of their hands.

The next hours just became awkward for them, as they thought about what Signora Bernadetta just told them.

Their parents couldn't just do that…could they?

Ludwig and Feliciano always thought that being King and Queen meant just making decisions and working together for their kingdom. They never though it actually meant getting married.

They though to all the marriages they knew, their parents and grandparents, how romantic they were, their embraces, their kisses on the mouth or whatever else they did behind closed doors that had the servants moving them away and telling them to leave them in peace.

Did they have to do all that? Did they have to show each other such devotion and attention? Go on dates and give exaggerated presents to the other? To both, it seemed weird and unusual.

Yes, they did care for each other deeply, almost like family, but they didn't think it was to that extent. It was disgusting, and they made silent promises to themselves to never get mushy with each other. They would rule this kingdom just as they were, best friends.

Rome was the capital city of the Italian province. It was wonderful and enchanting, with ancient relics of their past and the most amazing places to dine. It was constantly visited from many others outside the province and even kingdom. Because of its great beauty and important historical value, it was many times chosen as the city for the Four Kingdoms meeting and later ball.

It was held once a year, mostly as a great exchange of the four kingdoms, for all the Kings, Queens and Jacks to meet in friendly manner away from the constant duties of their positions, hoping to better strengthen bonds and better depend on the other in the case of war or any other sort of emergency.

Many nobles were invited to attend, or others who were just lucky enough to get an invitation. Those who couldn't only remained watching by the streets, held by gates or guards to not let them impose on the feast. Yet they all came, hoping for a glimpse of these royals.

Feliciano was finally seven years old and could be accepted to come to the ball as the future Queen of Hearts along with the rest of his family. He was dressed extravagantly well for the occasion, all sewn by his mother and help from the maids in his household with the richest of fabrics and most expensive details.

When he was first seen by all with it, they all glowed, showering him with compliments, hugs and kisses. They were indeed proud of what they made and that Feliciano looked dignified enough to be in this ball. Feliciano on the other hand, hated it.

It was tight, stuffy, certain parts piercing or scratching on his skin and it brought him immense heat. Many times on the carriage trip he tried to get rid of it, only to have his mother tighten whatever was loose that could give Feliciano easy escape.

He already couldn't wait to get it off.

It was Feliciano's very first time out of his village, quite a long way to take to the city despite it being in his very own province. The views, the hills, the lakes, rivers and just all the land the beautiful sun of the day shone upon as they continued onwards to the city was just enough to make Feliciano forget about the annoying clothing he was draped with, eyes glued to the window as he witnessed the beauty of his Kingdom.

The city was just as spectacular as anything he had seen on the route, like a marbled jeweled crowning the long line of hills, seeming to bow to him as he entered through the main gates. He saw buildings taller than he ever knew, piled together, an intimidating maze that he knew he would get lost in if he dared go alone. They were adorned in all forms of marble, to give it breath and life, looking to be moving along with the grand amount of people that piled and walked among the streets. Feliciano had never seen so many people in once place before. It was packed for the ball, all sides of the rode covered with eyes on the moving carriage Feliciano was on. He didn't understand why all these people were staring at him, screaming, shouting and pointing to him excitedly. He waved to them though, as happily as he was meeting with a good friend. It only got the crowds to get more excited, jumping and waving back to him. To Feliciano, it was fun, so he continued to do this, even getting the window down and shouting to them in their greet: "Ciao Ciao!" hoping for all to hear. And they did, giving him the very same greeting, ogling at his cuteness and even kindness. No other noble had greeted and waved to them like this. Feliciano was so tempted to step down and join them, play with the countless of children and just spend a nice walk through this new city. He was not allowed though, he was even pushed back into his seat the closer they got to the main building of the city.

Walls rose to divide it from the rest, all entrances packed with heavily armed guards who only gave entrance to the finest carriages with royal or noble symbols. The building stood like a fine palace, much bigger than Feliciano's own mansion, in red and gold details and symbols, the yard paved in a cream cobblestone and wonderfully kept grass, bushes, trees and even flowers. Already Feliciano wanted to run through and loose himself to them, pointing to his mother, suggesting the most beautiful flower accessories to make.

They waited in a long line of carriages. Once they arrived to the entrance, all the passengers would step down and make their presence known to the air of the palace. They were greeted by servants and then lead forward inside. Feliciano saw as the carriage before them was the one that held the Hearts royal family, King Aldrich being the first to step down, followed by the rest of his family, which got more servants, banners and flags to decorate their welcome.

"Guardati mamma! È Ludwig!" Feliciano began to jump in his seat as soon as he saw him appear right behind his mother.

He couldn't hold it, and as soon as he noticed the distraction the rest of his family had, he pulled the door open and rushed off, ignoring the shouts his mother and grandfather gave him.

"Ludwig! Ludwig! Ludwig! Ludwig!" He ran at rapid speeds towards him. It was too fast for even the young prince to notice, quickly jumped on in a tightening and even choking hug. Everyone turned worriedly towards him, but quick breaths of relief were taken when they saw that it was only Feliciano. Ludwig didn't mind at all, he was used to Feliciano always

greeting him in such a way, especially after they haven't seen each other in a couple of weeks, which was an equivalent of years to them. He easily embraced him back and they both didn't mind their clothes getting dirty as they rolled about the floor, giggling and laughing.

"You're here! You're here! You're here!" Ludwig shouted, of course ecstatic, he was worried that he would have to go through this stuffy meeting bored in a corner just watching people talk, eat and dance.

"All right, that's enough boys," Monika had to depart and stand them properly, fixing what she could of their clothing, even complimenting on Feliciano's handsome wear.

"I'm so sorry about this," Renata came and quickly apologized.

"It's all right," Aldrich spoke up, "we must be getting inside immediately, the rest are awaiting us."

They all nodded and both the Beilschmidts and Valenti came inside in quite a mess together, talking among each other much to the surprise of the guests. The Beilschmidts had fame with entering such feasts with seriousness and order, but here they were, laughing and even joking with the Valenti.

While both families were distracted with greeting many of the guests, Ludwig and Feliciano escaped together to meet more of this palace, see what fun they could have while here. Ludwig admitted that it was probably the finest ball he had ever attended, and that was saying something, for he lived in the main castle in the kingdom capital and had already seen his fair share of royal balls.

Everyone, especially the royals, were dressed in their finest wear, all types of expensive jewels adorned them, the greatest colors, with attitude and slow movements that seemed they had trained to take. They both admitted it was quite beautiful, but they also seemed so strained, still and serious, their conversations boring and uneventful.

Only a couple of minutes into the feast and already the boys wanted to leave, tempted by the fields of the outside they saw through the many large windows. They had found an exit, and readily took it, wanting to head off and have it for themselves. Renata had spotted and stopped them on time, grabbing them by their shoulders and stilling them in their spot.

"I'm sorry boys, but we all need you to stay inside."

"But why?"

"There's nothing to do in here!"

"Please boys, just stay in here," she begged, a worrying look in her eyes that even scared Feliciano.

He didn't say anymore and Ludwig did the same, settling on just walking around with their mothers, greeting many who coed at them. They commented on their future positions, on

how nice it was that they already got along so well, at how cute they were and already giving them advice on what to do once they were at the throne. Both of them were only seven years old, and none of the things they said when it came to that aspect made sense to them. To appease to their families, they only nodded and smiled, many times glancing to the exits hoping for a chance to play outside, but everyone kept an eye on them, knowing of their want, and for some reason they just wouldn't let it happen.

They were taken to dinner in one of the high floors, near a balcony where they overlooked to the still continuing feast, dancers taking the floor, music playing, and guests still arriving. With their food done and their families impending them from doing much, they gazed down in silence, commenting from time to time on some outrageous hat or exaggerated make up on either a man or woman.

And then they entered. This small family of only a father, a mother and a small child who seemed around Ludwig and Feliciano's age. Jet black hair, small dark eyes, and despite his age, walking knowingly, like he already had the wisdom of an old man. The rest of his family came into the feast just like him, their clothing of red kimonos and hakamas standing outrageously different from the rest, but just as extravagant and beautiful. Ludwig and Feliciano's eyes were settled on them, intrigued, never had they seen people from the Japanese province in person.

The Japanese rarely left their island, thinking the German, Italian and other provinces of the kingdom too brash, rude and of course, different. They only presented themselves on such occasions as these, especially this family, who held a rather important member in their midst.

"Mamma, who are they?" Feliciano asked Renata by pulling on her long dress, clearly pointing to the new inhabitants of the ball.

She smiled, knowingly, even giggling for this was an opportune moment.

"That's the Honda family, a great noble family of importance from the Japanese province. You see that little boy," she pointed over to the youngest member, "that's Kiku Honda, chosen by the gods as the next Jack of Hearts."

That truly perked the children's attention, both the boys smiling as if they were just introduced to a new friend that instant.

"So he'll be our jack of hearts then!" Ludwig jumped in enthusiasm.

"Precisely." Renata confirmed, receiving a chorus of 'Uuuuu' from the boys.

"Then we have to introduce ourselves!" Feliciano shouted, eagerly jumping on his spot, Renata fearing that he was willing to jump from this floor just to get to the family.

"What?"

It was quite sudden, Feliciano's impulse, already wanting to come towards them, rushing off to leave their secured balcony.

“Feliciano! No!” She called out, trying to catch with him on time.

“Why not?” Even as his mother tried to rush towards him, Feliciano didn’t stop at all, continuing all until he crashed against a strong pair of legs.

He fell to the floor by the force, and the figure didn’t dare help, he found this just the force enough to stop the young boy from moving any further. King Aldrich looked down to him, a pillar thick and tall enough to reach the high ceilings of this palace in the young boy’s eyes. Feliciano was rarely intimidated by the King, he had learned to be as friendly with him as he was with the rest of Ludwig’s family, but this time, his blue eyes shone like a predator, a darkness in him that made the young boy quiver, wishing he could move and rush over to his mother’s side for comfort.

“A meeting between the King, Queen and Jack is prohibited before the age of arising. It is a law given to us by the gods and we must play our part that such a meeting does not take place until then,” Aldrich told him, forceful, enough for Feliciano to hear and understand him. He was not willing to repeat himself.

“But why?” Feliciano dared ask, “I can meet Ludwig just fine. Why can’t we meet Kiku? Isn’t it just as important as getting to know Ludwig?”

Aldrich didn’t answer him, he simply stared on, seeming to grow taller, getting the young boy to meek down fearfully. Not being able to continue his watch on him, he turned his gaze down.

“Do not get near him. Just honor my command and don’t question it any further."

“But I want to-”

“Feliciano!” He shouted, a commanding tone that was just what got Feliciano to give up, to practically scramble back to his mother’s side, holding to her skirt, trembling and not daring to gaze back to the King.

The room went somberly silent as they all witnessed the scene, the only sound being Feliciano’s whimpering. Renata rubbed at hand on his hair and Ludwig had taken his hand to caress, both comforting gestures enough to make the future Queen relax.

They had brought him to the table, distracting him with some much loved desserts. As the minutes passed, Feliciano was soothed enough as if nothing had ever happened. Renata had gone to have a dance with her husband, along with many others, leaving the two children alone with snacks and desserts that hopefully will keep them put there for the rest of the ball. But it wasn’t enough to still the curiosity they held for Kiku Honda, who spent most of the feast by his parent’s side, no emotion shown on his face, not even boredom or excitement. Ludwig and Feliciano kept their gaze on him like magnets, an impulse in both of them to do something against what King Aldrich just made them clear.

Chapter End Notes

EDITED: On 10.10.2024

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

> I would like to apologize for the long time it took me. Lots of projects along with many other personal things happened this month and it gave me no time to write at all. But finally we here have a new chapter. Since now finals time is approaching, my next update will probably take some time as well, but let's see how it goes. Hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Despite the many stories he heard back in his island province about the main land, he had actually been quite impressed with what he had met in his first trip. Everything indeed had been different as he had been warned. The buildings, the food, the customs, even the people. Even with how well they had taught him a good basic grasp of both Italian and German, he still felt behind as he talked to all these native speakers. None didn't mind, they shooed any mistakes and only made comments on how cute it was, some even reaching down to pinch his cheeks. That was probably one of the only things he disliked…the constant touching from all these nobles and royals. Was this what he would have to deal with constantly once he made permanent residence in the capital to fulfill his duty as the Jack of Hearts? Never mind that, he would endure it for his kingdom, he had been chosen by the gods after all.

His parents wanted him to meet with the current King, Queen and Jack of Hearts and he was eager to ask them questions and to hope he already had some blessings from them. A part of him had hoped to meet with the young prince and his future Queen, and his eyes had searched eagerly for any hint of them, but with so many people wanting to converse and grabbing his attention, it had simply been too hard.

It was unfair, he should be given a chance to meet with the two people he was to serve and rule along with, but everyone had denied him the chance, for a reason none seemed to want to explain. But for now, he wanted peace. He was dealing with too much commotion all of a sudden. He was not used to it and he needed some quiet as a good recharge. The owners of the palace had granted him entrance into one of their galleries for that peace, giving the young future Jack of Hearts a chance to witness the arts that their kingdom was greatly known for.

He was lead inside, the large red doors shut behind him and he was left in a pleasant quietness, too much for a room that was right next to a continuing ball full of chattering and music. With all these artistic treasures surrounding him, he could easily forget about it all and loose himself with many images of men, of nature and of their gods, the Aces. They were all so beautiful, a dance of images for his eyes, a partner for him in each masterpiece. Part of him wanted to take the hand of one of those many statues and dance like those he had seen in the ball. They just seemed so real, so lively, like they could jump out and- okay, not like that.

Ludwig couldn't hold his balance any longer, and as so, Feliciano had fallen from it, pulling Ludwig along with him to the floor. The crash against the floor was enough to shake a near pillar, which held a large bust of one Heart's greatest warriors, fallen to the floor in pieces. It was the crash that brought sudden silence between the three, only for a short moment worried over it. But Ludwig and Feliciano didn't think more of the worthless mess when finally they had Kiku for themselves.

"Hi, Kiku!" Feliciano jumped, rushing towards him, taking his hand to shake like he had seen many adults greet. It was hard enough to shake all of Kiku's being, already getting dizzy and trying to let go of the hold.

"I'm Feliciano, and this is Ludwig!" Feliciano helped Ludwig up and ushered him forward to meet, and the young prince gave him the same shaking greeting that Kiku was starting to dislike.

"How did you-"

"You look very pretty!" Feliciano complimented.

"Your clothes look really comfortable," Ludwig continued.

"Your hair is so soft," Feliciano went ahead and touched it.

"Can you see with your eyes like that?"

Kiku gasped offended.

"Did you come here riding a dragon?"

"Huh?"

"The Japanese province has the prettiest dragons, not that ours aren't."

"Is it true what they say about ninjas?"

"Can you teleport?"

Kiku held his hands to both of them, a form to tell them to fall silent. It surprisingly worked, and they had stopped their insistent and frivolous questions. Like training puppies they held and waited for a command, just as eager and active despite their sudden stillness.

"Um…who are you both?" He asked, easing himself and being presentable. Despite how they acted and addressed themselves toward him, he still wanted to continue to treat them with respect.

"Didn't I-"

"I know, I meant if you two are perhaps sons of nobles or perhaps even servants?" He talked like an adult, and that was something that just didn't seem to make sense to Feliciano and Ludwig.

They stared on as if Kiku had spoken to them in a different language. The silence was finally broken with laughter from Feliciano, a sound so beautiful to fit well with the gallery.

“Why should it be important now?” He took a gentle hold of his hands, one that Kiku though comforting and very soft. “We should go play and have fun.”

What a suggestion they had given him, what a chance, one many times he wasn’t given despite being a child. He was so tempted to take it, join, go and see what it was like, with children just like himself.

“Come on, we found some weird looking spheres in the third floor,” Ludwig said, already leading them forward.

Feliciano took a strong hold of Kiku’s hand and lead him, giving him no choice but to participate in whatever silly game they had planned.

As Ludwig had said, the third floor had a room filled with amazing colorful spheres, looking like large marbles, expensive, surely fragile and definitely not to play with. But both Ludwig and Feliciano didn’t seem to pay attention to that detail. They looked just like any other balls they had played with, surely they worked just the same. Kiku, who could tell the fragility of the items, though of stopping them, but his curiosity beat anything else, and like the others, had taken a bright red-orange one that seemed like fire blazing in his hand. It looked, to all three, like magic they could omit, like the ones they had seen their own parents do. It was the image they needed to start their pretend game, one where their minds let them think they were throwing the most powerful magic at their enemies.

The three of them started a song of booms, cracks and shots from their mouths, throwing all the different spheres across, many landing on either the floor or the top of other surfaces in the room without a single damage. With no harm, no matter how harshly they threw, it simply let them become much more chaotic with their throws, even beginning to throw them at each other. A game of simple catch was starting, a mess and array of different colored spheres to entertain their eyes, to smile, to play, to jump all across the room and just grant to the three future monarchs a moment to live their childhood.

The loud laughter and childish screams would of course attract attention, by another monarch who had just happened to be walking by the area and noticed the sound. This prince opened the door just as he saw a pink sphere pass right by his head, then a yellow one, a green, all quick dots dashing before him dangerously.

Did these people know what those even were?

“What in the-” and that’s when he finally laid his eyes on the culprits, a mischievous laughter that was enough to alert the others of his presence.

They each dropped their own sphere, perplexed, caught, the weight of what they were doing wrong suddenly dawning upon them.

The thirteen year old prince of Diamonds, François Bonnefoy, entered the room with an evil smirk, doing a favor and even closing the door behind them. “What a predicament I have

found our three future rulers to be in. What would your parents think if they knew about this? Playing with the spheres of Validity and look," he turned his gaze towards the young Japanese, "speaking and playing with your future jack. The consequences could be pretty dire." He didn't look at all worried about that, after all, the punishment was not to be for him but for the young future monarchs.

"You don't know that!" Ludwig stood out.

He always held a great dislike for the Diamond prince, particularly for this attitude as if he's always challenging, belittling him. Ludwig was to be King of Hearts, one of a powerful kingdom, more so than the Diamond Kingdom had fame for, and he would not be looked down upon from other princes and princesses.

"Oh, but I do, and you're making a big mistake. I suggest you put all the spheres back in their place and begin to head out."

"Yo-you won't tell our parents, right, Francis?" Feliciano begged, teary eyes, already placing his own sphere back, wanting to come close and try what he could to convince him.

Francis had a soft spot for the young Queen, his demeanor completely changing to the kind brother figure Feliciano looked up to. He soften his hair and let his hand caress at his cute puffed cheeks, touches that Ludwig seemed to despise, Kiku having to hold him down from moving any further to stop it with brute force.

"No, Feliciano, but only if you come out this instant, return to the ball and let Kiku return to his family."

"No!" Ludwig interrupted, angrily, a glare that he tried to make fearsome, but his childish face and baby blue eyes didn't help at all. It only received a chuckle from Francis.

"Don't make this any harder, Ludwig. Come on, before anybody else finds us."

"No! You're not in charge of telling me what to do. If I want to keep playing, I'll stay, if I want to keep spending time with Feliciano and Kiku, I will, and you won't stop me!" He pulled Feliciano back to their side rather harshly, in the process knocking one of the biggest spheres in the room, the one they had tried avoid due to its largeness and dark colors. Ludwig caught it just in time before it smashed against the floor, but it began to tremble in his fingertips, and from its stillness, it dashed off like a bullet across the room, smashing a window and flying off to land in another distant corner in the deep forest.

All four stood astonished, the echo that the sphere left still a haunting sound, a reminder of the great trouble they could get in now that they had lost one of the spheres. Paralyzed they remained, hoping it could return just as it had flew off, or thinking about how they could get it back, each with their own idea until Ludwig decided to act on his own.

He took off the cape he was given to wear and left it over a chair. He headed towards the cracked hole in the glass, looked to the distance below him and over to the dark woods that now looked rather fearful, like the dwelling of villains in the fairytales they told him about.

But he had to get it back! He couldn't be the cause of getting both Feliciano and Kiku into big trouble.

"I-I'll go get it!" He ran passed them, quickly before they dared want to stop him.

But Feliciano couldn't let him, not at least alone, when he looked so scared, tears surely swelling in his eyes from the fault he felt.

"Ludwig, wait! Wait!" Feliciano called after him, but Ludwig didn't stop, he continued trying to find an exit. He would take any, even a window if he had to.

Francis and Kiku ran right behind them, hoping to stop them, hoping to find a better explanation to what had happened. Something about just getting it in those woods seemed out of place, especially with the heavy security and Renata's clear warning of not wanting them to leave the ball. Ludwig didn't care about this, he found an open window in one of the halls, leading right to the garden, by tall bushes that could cover well his escape to the few that strolled along.

He was sure he was going to do this alone, but he felt the joining of steps, the tired breaths of Feliciano, right behind him, following along without a moment's hesitation.

"Ludwig! Feliciano!" Francis called out to them, but he was left ignored.

At least Kiku- he turned and he was gone as well, following behind the royals he would serve in the future.

"Yo-you-you three!" It wouldn't work.

The three children had gone off, over the gates that separated the palace from the woods, to whatever they would find alone.

He had to get Aldrich and Augusto.

"I obviously won," Feliciano commented.

"It's unfair, you didn't get tripped," Kiku tried to reason.

Ludwig didn't make any comment, he was busy looking for any hint of the sphere, searching behind trees, bushes, in the mud, even in plain sight. It was hard when the sphere could easily blend in with the darkness they were surrounded with. It was odd, how scared he felt in these woods, lost, in danger, like a monster could soon rise from beneath their feet and eat them. The forests of the kingdom were usually beautiful, perfect to stroll around, safe enough for even three children to play in alone. Yet this one, sent a shiver through Ludwig with each step he took deeper. It was a surprise Feliciano could remain as lively, their light to continue across, keeping their small conversations active and with shine in them, playing games, making their experience even here fun. But it was weakening with each crack or sudden far

off step into the distance. Feliciano cowered more, holding on to Ludwig's arm tightly and Ludwig even found comfort in it, slowing his pace just so Feliciano could remain close to him. Kiku was just as close, keeping his eyes open like Ludwig's for the sphere, the chills of the forest reaching him. They only continued because of the need to find the sphere to avoid large trouble.

Minutes went on, Kiku thinking maybe hours, recognizing a boulder they had passed once already.

"I-I think we should head back," he suggested, forcing them to a stop, looking around to find a route. None was presented to them, only fading footsteps that had already made circles around the woods.

"Bu-but what about the sphere?" Feliciano asked, scared and trembling.

"We can't just return without it." Despite how fearsome the situation looked, Ludwig didn't want to give up yet.

"This place looks really dangerous. I think if we just tell our parents what happened, they'll have better luck finding it," Kiku suggested.

"It-it's not, dangerous," Ludwig still trembled, and there was hesitation as he let go of Feliciano, moving ahead to prove that there was nothing to fear. It didn't calm Feliciano at all, who extended his arms, begging for Ludwig to come back to their side. The three of them couldn't get separated, they would just get lost and worsen the situation.

"Lu-ludwig!" Kiku called.

"There's nothing to be afraid of, it's just-" a look between two large trees, a gasp, and Ludwig fell back to the floor. Feliciano and Kiku quickly came to his help, but as soon as they did, Ludwig ushered them to remain silent, pointing to the spot he just took a look of. Quietly, both the boys looked, and noticed between the mist two cloaked figures, right over the very sphere they had been looking for. Ludwig covered both their mouths just in time before they gasped loudly enough to be noticed, and suggested they just looked, hopefully they would leave. It wasn't likely, for they remained, watching the sphere, analyzing, talking, too far off to be comprehensible.

The three of them were intrigued by the cloaks they wore, black, with no recognizable symbol from any of the four kingdoms. They remained well hidden, no clear image of their faces or even skin from hands or feet. They wondered who these people were, what were they doing there, or if maybe they were just friends who had found for them the sphere. Feliciano was close to running to them, greeting them as friendly as he had learned to be with everyone, but Ludwig kept a tight grip on him, not daring to give him the chance.

"What are they doing?" Kiku dared break the silence with a single whisper.

They felt a sudden huff, a breath, another presence standing tall right behind them, the shadow making them turn that instant to face what was there. It was a third cloaked figure, his brown eyes bright enough for them to see even in the darkness that he was covered well

with. Despite how human he looked, something about him didn't feel at all normal, a darkness emitting that made all three tremble, staying close together, wishing they could run, but it was useless when they were surrounded. No words came from the man, but a striking stare that held them in place.

"Kirian! Louis!" He called, calling the attention of both the men from afar.

The next words he spouted none of the three could recognize, a language never before heard of and definitely different from the ones they knew of all four kingdoms. The other two men reached him and smirked upon noticing the presence they were blessed with.

"What a complete package, the future King, Queen and Jack of Hearts, all presented together just for us," he made the others realize, and it only got their sinister smiles to grow larger.

"The gods haven't abandoned us yet it seems," one of the other men said, coming closer.

"King Khaos would be absolutely pleased," and then one had taken out a blade from his sheath, the metal shinning bright enough to reflect on the faces of the three terrified boys.

They trembled, their breaths heavy and even tears on their eyes, holding to each other tightly, as if their closeness could work well enough as a shield. They came ever closer until no space was given to the three future monarchs to escape, increasing their fear, their cries, weeping, hoping that the site was enough to give these other three strangers mercy. None was presented. One man had made daggers appear from his sleeve, another had begun to produce dark magic from his hand, and then there was the one who had raised his blade, ready for an easy slash that could take out the three of them in that moment.

Ludwig acted quick and gave a kick to his leg, strong enough to have him wince, moan in pain and even crouch as he tried to surpass it. It was just the moment they needed to run, Ludwig keeping a tight hold on Feliciano and letting Kiku run ahead. They were given shouts and insults, surely in the men's language and surely they were chasing them, not willing to loose such a chance.

They didn't care if they were on the right path or not, they just wanted to run as far away from them as possible, not caring about the sphere anymore or if it brought them deeper into the forest to the point of never being found. They preferred such a faith over being captured by them.

They tried their best to run along faster, but no matter, they still kept a sure target on them, beginning to throw arrows, magical beams and even some of their daggers. They flew past them by just inches, but never truly hitting any of them. They moved too quickly to be able to.

The chase continued further into the woods, through fiercer trees, boulders that halted their way or even made them trip, creeks, and finally a dead end given to them by the tallness of a mountain and the entrance of a cave. They were cornered, nowhere to go but the wall of rock that they spread their hands over, hoping to dig themselves in or find some hidden passage. Things did not work like in their stories and fairytales.

Was this it? Was this supposed to be their deaths? It was only sure when finally the men appeared, noticing that there was nowhere else for the royals to go. They gave them the chance to quiver, to shake and cry, watch them die in the utter misery they deserved. Feliciano was the first to loudly cry, holding ever so tightly to Ludwig, and even Kiku quivered at this side. Only Ludwig still managed to stand tall, despite his fear and terror.

He wanted to do something, he wanted to save Kiku, especially Feliciano. Something, something, something, he pleaded in his mind, hoping for the gods to bless him with a chance. Nothing, the men only came closer. Ludwig pushed Feliciano and Kiku back, his breathing becoming so heavy that the men though he would die out of breathlessness.

But it wasn't the fear that fueled that, it was something else, it was the breathing Ludwig's body needed.

Ludwig felt a sudden power surge through his body, like his blood had become even stronger, and both Feliciano and Kiku witnessed as it even glowed through his pale skin. It thumped like his heart, the glowing making his way all across his body, fearsome enough to even stop the three men from approaching any closer. Ludwig groaned in pain, whimpered, holding his own body, this energy becoming painful. It had to be released, he wanted it out, he wanted it out!

Ludwig raised his hand and simply slashed it forward like a sword, a powerful beam of fire fleeing from his body, aiming right at the men, burning enough to have them move back, their hoods beginning to burn.

It was nothing, they could surely- another throw from the prince's body, this one more intense, had them falling to the ground, lost in the heat that had them caged to the floor. Any opportune moment to stand was only continued to be blocked by the savage throws the prince threw at them.

Ludwig didn't know what he was doing, what this was, but it was working enough to keep them away and thus he continued, to the widened eyes of his future queen and jack.

At one point it began to tire, he lost energy, he began bleeding from his nose and mouth, he turned a sickly gray and even kneeled to the floor in defeat, only maintaining awake by a need to make sure that Feliciano and Kiku were okay and to fight on if they dared move any closer.

"Ludwig! Ludwig!" Feliciano called, holding him against him, rubbing his hands over his arms and chest desperately, wanting to wake him, wanting to clean the blood and return his healthy color.

Kiku stood by his side, taking a handkerchief he had kept and using it to clean the blood, looking over to the three bodies ahead.

They weren't dead, but surely burned intensely, not a threat anymore and they could calm for now. Their worry was now trying to figure out what happened to Ludwig and how to return him back to normal.

The hooves of horses against the ground, many by the sounds of it, came close, surely to their spot. They feared it to be more of the same men. Feliciano held Ludwig even closer, who looked weak enough to fall unconscious that moment and Kiku tried what he could to protect by covering them. The approaching figures turned towards them, and the three children were relieved to see men with symbols of the Hearts Kingdom, a search party their families had sent to find them.

Two soldiers moved instantly to check on the other three men laying unconscious on the floor. Once recognizing their marks and their cloaks, they placed chains on their hands and tried to move them over one of the horses to imprisonment once they were back in the city. The three children now breathed easily, but once they saw King Aldrich and Augusto coming hastily towards them, they were reminded of the severe punishment they were going to get. So many things they could be blamed for, so many things that went wrong, but part of them was still relieved to see them, to be saved and be granted a safe trip back to the city.

“Are you three all right?” Augusto asked, checking Kiku, checking his beloved Feliciano, embracing him and kissing his face entirely in relief.

When he looked at Ludwig, distress could be seen on him even as he tried to look calm for the rest. What Aldrich feared happened, proof with the weakness in Ludwig’s body, high presence of power from him despite so and just the fact that he stood next to both his future Queen and Jack. Augusto didn’t know what he could say, no matter what he did the three of them were to be scolded and punished by the King. As it was Aldrich’s turn to come close, Augusto though to make up an excuse, anything to keep Feliciano from being humiliated. But he didn’t think quick enough, already Aldrich stood before them and simply stared. He gazed to his grandson, there almost lifeless, in the arms of his queen and by the side of his Jack, out of the palace and the culprits of a missing sphere of Validity. He didn’t say a word but gazed strongly at Feliciano with blame, the fearsome stare that brought Feliciano to quiver, to tear up, hang his head against his own king in shame. Augusto knew that they had misbehaved, that they had broken rules and had even put their own lives at risk, he couldn’t do anything but lean before them still, waiting for the actions Aldrich would use to deal with the situation. To his surprise, only silence continued to reign on, even from the soldiers who awaited them to leave back to the city. Aldrich came close only to pick up Ludwig, hold him against his chest, rubbing his hands against his back, a calming that worked wonderfully to ease his trembling, hopefully to rest.

Without even a glance, he turned towards his horse, now only waiting for Augusto to move along with his grandson and the Honda. Augusto picked Feliciano as Aldrich did with Ludwig, taking a good hold of Kiku’s hand and moving them towards their own horse. He made sure the three of them were comfortable before he gave the signal to Aldrich to head back, using the time to soothe Feliciano for any harshness he was to be given when they returned.

Chapter End Notes

EDITED: On 13.10.2024

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

> Wow, I updated quicker than I expected. I don't know if next one will be like that but I am getting a lot of time to work on both this and my other things for my university, so let's hope and see. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kiku told what happened on their return back. He was truthful about everything, even admitting how Ludwig had broken a window in the palace and how he and Feliciano had decided on joining him to the woods. They all heard patiently and kept their ears for the small boy.

Ludwig remained resting over Aldrich's body, and Feliciano only paid attention to him, relief upon seeing his normal color return, blood stopping, breathing, enjoying an easy sleep like he was in his own room and not on an easy pacing horse with his grandfather.

Kiku finished just as the palace was once again in site, the ball in an array with countless of dark figures searching.

"There they are!" Someone had called out, and already rushing figures came towards them, not wanting to wait any longer.

The first couple they recognized was Kiku's parents, his mother quickly taking him in his arms to caress into her safety, his father relieved, stroking his hair nicely to a calm.

"We're so sorry over what has occurred. I promise we will deal with his own punishment accordingly," he begged to the king, turning and bowing. He would to the floor if Aldrich allowed him.

"I insist you do, but it's already too late. The damage has been done," he ushered his horse forward without the rest, not a word to even Augusto and Feliciano. He wanted to give his grandson proper rest for now and his family needed to see that he was well.

Aldrich went right pass Renata and Vincenzo, who came for Feliciano and held him like Kiku's own parents had done.

"I know it's not in our position to speak this early, but, I'm glad both our sons are all right, and I'm very sorry for everything that has happened. We will deal with what we can," Renata told the Japanese couple, and they smiled warmly at her, surely taken by her kindness, beauty and utterly sweet voice. Her son looked remarkably like her. They hoped he will grow those very same attributes when he becomes Queen. It was nice to know from now that Kiku would be able to serve and hopefully befriend such a kind looking and adoring boy.

They wished some last words and Kiku's parents were off, to their carriage, to their place of stay and return to Japan the next day. Feliciano waved to his jack, and he waved back, all until they were only but specks to each other.

That would be Kiku's last time in the mainland before he was to take his place as the Jack.

Feliciano was returned to the palace with his parents and grandfather, the feast coming to an end, many beginning to leave once they knew that the prince and the future Queen and Jack were doing well. That feeling of security and relief was taken then by the presence of the three clocked figures. They were still tied, held and pushed on by soldiers through the palace, but it wasn't enough to stop anyone from moving away with clear fear, quivering, and some even crying.

Renata, Vincenzo and Augusto covered Feliciano entirely from the men's angry and blaming gaze. They could see in them intent for murder and kill, but the three only stared bravely, powerful and with no fear to strike at them if they dared do anything to their son and grandson.

The tense atmosphere continued until all three men were taken out from the palace, into the confinements of their carriage, granting a sense of peace back again to the finishing feast.

It wasn't until the carriage began to take its route that they let Feliciano escape from the protective circle they had made for him. He stared on to the gates, where he didn't see a sign of the metal carriage anymore.

"Who were they, mamma?" He took her hand and looked up to her for the answer.

Renata sigh, a tiredness and age shown on her face. Feliciano stood closer, hands grasping to her dress, hoping to calm her from this sudden stress.

"Nobody wanted you to know about this until your year of Arising." She looked down to him and managed a smile, stroking his hair and easing them out of the palace. "Feliciano, you know about the story of creation, right?"

"Of course I do." He was proud of his knowledge about it. "The four aces created the four kingdoms to their image and then placed their first Kings, Queens and Jacks to rule over and guard over what they had created."

Renata chuckled. Of course he did. The story of the Aces is of the many Feliciano is constantly told about.

"Well, there's…a part of it no one really likes to tell." He placed Feliciano in their own carriage, alone for now while Vincenzo and Augusto were looking for Lovino and settling some last things with the ball.

"When the Aces created the kingdoms, they were content of course. Their creations were beautiful, the perfection they had envisioned, but they felt like they needed to make…two last blessings." She closed the carriage door tightly. "They created two other kingdoms."

“Two more kingdoms?”

“Yes, simple names they had, the Light Kingdom and the Dark Kingdom, one to the north, the other to the south."

Feliciano though to all the maps he knew, but none of them showed such territories to both the north and south. He began to even wonder if his mother was telling the truth, but she would never do such a thing. He only continued to attend.

“The Aces created these kingdoms as a symbol of union, lands for all of the people and creatures of the four kingdoms to coexist and work as one." That sounded ideal, a beautiful utopia Feliciano though, but then Renata turned sour, a frown that already showed that it was not that promise. “Their governing systems were nothing like ours. Both these kingdoms relied on one Queen for the Light Kingdom, and one King for the Dark Kingdom. They were eternal, placed on our world as powerful guardians from the Aces, watchers that peace would maintain in both those kingdoms. Queen Pisa was exceptionally kind and wanted only but prosperity and calm for her kingdom, as well as peace with all the rest of the kingdoms. King Khaos…”

Feliciano recalled the men mentioning that name, perhaps their leader, and from the sudden fear in Renata’s eyes at the mere mentioning, it could be the case.

“Was a horrid man, vengeful, murderous and not an ounce of mercy to give, even to children.” Feliciano had seen enough proof of that. “He was a greedy ruler, who took the riches of the kingdom for himself, leaving the rest of it in poverty and misery. But even everything was not enough to satisfy him. He wanted more power, control to even exceed those limited to him by the Aces.

There was a period in our time, those we call the Blackened Decades, where he pushed for war all across our world, managing the fall and disappearance of the White Kingdom. Khaos had killed Pisa himself and sought the same faith for the rest of the Kings and Queens. The world fought for many years to stop this man, but one soldier, one King, made the difference to grant us that victory.” In her story she smiled, proudness, a hand caressing a symbol of Hearts she had in her medallion necklace. “One of our great grandfathers.”

“King Romulus,” Feliciano knew. He was the reason of their prosperity and fame all across the four kingdoms.

“Indeed. He, along with his own Queen and Jack, united the strength of all the kingdoms in a ruthless army that was enough to defeat Khaos’s. Romulus battled on Khaos himself and had come close to killing him on behalf of the life he had taken from Pisa, but refused to, for no matter what Khaos had done, he was still a powerful entity from the very Aces. Instead, he took some of his power and banished him to tough and lifeless territories. His kingdom was dissolved into the Club Kingdom, and what was left of the White Kingdom was dissolved into the Spades Kingdom. That area he was imprisoned to was locked well with magic from all the Kings, Queens and Jacks of the time. He was left alone with nothing, but it never ceased his anger and vengeance. Many times we have received threats of war from him, especially to the Hearts Kingdom, for it was the one that led his defeat.”

“But you said he’s alone, vanished, imprisoned with magic. He can’t really be a threat anymore,” Feliciano hoped.

“As you saw yourself, many in his council had survived, as well as supporters who harbored hatred for the four kingdoms and had joined him throughout the years. Since the power of the locked wall and field only applies to him, his henchman can come in and out as freely as they wish. Each have different duties, but some specifically target the royals, especially those of the Hearts Kingdom. They usually provide a threat in feasts like these and bring with them dark magic that turns everything around them grim and deathly."

Feliciano was reminded on how darkened the woods seemed to him as he walked with Kiku and Ludwig, nothing like the security and enchantment he felt playing in any forests of Hearts.

“That’s why nobody wanted you out of the palace during the ball. Part of us knew some of them were bound to come.”

“Isn’t there a way to really stop them?”

“For now, all we can do is capture and imprison those we do find. The King and Queen of Hearts are actually in charge of travelling to the field that keeps Khaos, for every certain amount of years, to make sure it’s strong and that he hasn’t done anything out of hand.”

Silence as Feliciano though about what she just said, knowing he will one day be Queen.

“So…I have to do that?”

She nodded and he grew terrified, holding to his mother closely, as if they could take him that instant to see those walls.

“But do not worry, when the time comes, you’ll go through the right preparation. I don’t think anything will happen. Those walls are powerful and have stood for many centuries.”

He could trust his mother’s words, he could ease for now, it was a duty far from their moment.

Silence went on for now, both watching outside the small windows as other dignitaries began to leave, the palace settling to a shush, many servants turning off or dimming the palace lights. Even if Augusto and Vincenzo had found Lovino, they still lay conversing with the owner of the palace, the guardian leader of Rome. From how immersed they seemed, plus Lovino’s annoyed looking face, they still had a lot to talk about.

“Mamma, what happened to Ludwig, did they cause it?” He asked, worried that he would get scolded for asking, but he needed to know, he needed to know Ludwig was going to be all right.

Renata sighed heavily, a worry that was to compare to Feliciano’s own.

“I’m afraid not. What happened to Ludwig…you and Kiku caused it,” she admitted, no matter how painful it would be for Feliciano to know, she would have to explain.

“No, no, I couldn’t have caused it. I didn’t want anything to happen to him, I love him, I would never,” he cried, big tears staining his entire face, a weeping that brought sorrow to Renata herself, taking her small boy to cradle into her lap, no matter how big he was starting to grow.

“Feliciano, you, Ludwig and Kiku were granted immense power from the gods, one that is too much for your little and young bodies to take. That amount of power needs to be dealt with carefully and it is not meant to be used until your year of Arising, when your bodies are grown and can deal with the training that comes with it. That’s why you were not meant to meet with Kiku yet. The Heart’s royal’s power is activated by the union of the three.”

That fire that Ludwig blew then, was actually his own power, the magic that had wondered Feliciano about the adults, one that at some point he thought of wanting to have, but now that he saw what it did to Ludwig, it was no longer appealing, nothing he wanted for himself, for Ludwig and for Kiku.

“He-he’s going to be okay, r-right? I-I mean, nothing happened to me or Kiku." He looked up to her with big brown shinning eyes, wet still with tears.

Renata only continued to look back with a great saddened expression, rocking her son, hands caressing at his arms.

“Ludwig is the future King, Feliciano. Of the three, he should hold the most power. With the activation and with his little experience, he has to continuously use that large amount that cannot fit in his body, releasing whatever harm that could be kept inside so it does not clog or burn. It could severe him horribly or even kill him if he does not deal with this properly.”

And there was no ease to Feliciano, who felt more at blame, knowing his best friend was to suffer out of their childish and careless actions.

“His family will do what they can, it’s not the first time it has happened to a King, but he will go through some harsh training and the next time we meet, things might be different and we’ll have to go along with it.”

He nodded, he will, anything to not see Ludwig fall so lifeless again.

“It all depends on how he can deal with it. Ludwig is strong, I’m sure he’ll manage.”

Renata smiled down to him and Feliciano finally smiled back, content and hopeful.

He truly did believe in Ludwig and surely this wouldn’t affect them so bad.

Erzsébet and Roderich rarely came to the Hearts Kingdom, but how they wished they could. What a breeze, what a color, what a view, what peace. They adored taking these joyous trips, out of the stress that came with the coming preparation for their own years of Arising. They took an easy stride on two well-kept horses, ones Augusto had offered to them, gladly for it was just the right animal companions that could help them make their way across the near

fields, valleys, forests and hills. They were nearing the goal they had set, and what a pity it was. They still wanted to keep on daring further, but they thought of the tiredness of the animals, plus other responsibilities they were given once they agreed on this little excursion.

They found a nice place to just stop and admire the height, all the grass and trees that extended all around them in great beauty. The breeze that blew was very refreshing, but not chilling. Roderich had to breathe it all in, all to himself if he could.

“No air is fresher than this,” he said to the very wind, for a moment forgetting that he was joined by the princess and Queen he would one day serve.

“Not even Club’s?” Erszébet chuckled.

Roderich was not one to compliment other Kingdoms that weren’t his. But then again, part of her future Jack’s family is from Hearts.

“It’s comparable,” he defended, but the glint in his eyes was nothing like he had given any other kingdom other than his own Austrian province in Clubs.

Erzsébet could see past all that and find the hidden wonder Roderich harbored for Hearts.

“I wish we could stay like this, in this peace, it’s just what I need.” He seemed like he would fall off from the horse and let himself float in the air.

“I’m still leading!” A shout broke it all.

“I can still reach!” Another called.

“Prove it to me!”

“Just you wait, Prince Potato!”

Three riders passed by them, in rushing speeds that had dust blowing to the face of the Jack, who tried to keep his patience, blowing in and out and not wanting to anger himself just yet.

The culprits to this, no other than the future King and Queen of hearts, Ludwig and Feliciano.

Their horses ran next to each other, surely on one team, laugthing, their small bodies jumping above in the air as they quickened the pace of their animals. Right behind them rushed the Prince and future King of Spades, Alfred, surely their competition trying to catch up to them. Then there was Gilbert’s, a maniac laugh as he passed. Francis’s, ever so elegantly and clean, like he was parading on a feast for all his subjects. Finally, there was Antonio and Lovino’s horses, who had a slow pace, easing past them without a trouble, immersed in their conversation. It was a surprise Lovino hadn’t joined in on this race, probably preferring to instead talk to the older servant boy.

Roderich was huffing, dirt now covering his very nice coat.

“Goodbye my peace, goodbye,” he protested, trying to clean with a handkerchief what he could. “For a boy whose powers got accidentally activated, he has made no difference.” He

wished he did, but Ludwig continued with the same games and playfulness.

“Roderich, that happened a year ago and he’s dealt with it rather well. Besides, he’s only eight, let him play for now,” she smiled, looking to the rushing figures ahead of them, feasting in their own race.

And just like Erzsébet could read his own thoughts, Roderich could do the same to her.

“You want to join in,” he noticed, having given up on riding the dirt, settling with it.

Erzsébet tried to hold the smile and the want, but it was very hard. She was already asking for a sort of permission with her gaze to him, and he sighed and let her. Not even a second passed and she rushed forward, raising more dust to dirty him.

“Just you guys wait,” she called loudly for the entire valley to hear, and she was received with shouts of both acceptance on her joining and insults when she dared pass them.

Roderich still refused to take part of this silliness and went on with his normal pace towards the spot they had all decided would be their final reaching, where they would rest and have a nice picnic.

It was at the top of a small clear hill, only decorated with a single tree on its top, covering the hill’s entirety in a cool and wonderful shadow. It had an excellent view all around them, space to enjoy all together and grass for their horses to eat. By the time Roderich had arrived, a blanket was already placed and they were preparing a small banquet of all the foods they had brought. Ludwig had to constantly stop Feliciano and Alfred from taking anything before everything was ready.

“Is that a Sachertorte?” Roderich gasped when he noticed it.

“Mütti made it for you,” Ludwig said proudly, having just placed it on the blanket with some other sweets and candies.

“Which reminds me. Ludwig, eine Rot.”

The young prince groaned, “I already did one in the last hour."

“Do we have to constantly remind you it’s two each afternoon hour. Now come on, the sooner the better.”

Ludwig put up a face. This had been fun the first few times, but now it was just tiring and repetitive.

“Please, Ludwig.” Of course it was Feliciano who would convince him.

He sat by the base of the tree, crossed his legs and made himself comfortable. Feliciano joined his side and laid his head on his shoulder, his own comfort, looking up to him expectantly for his exercise. Ludwig held out his arm, closed his eyes and focused as he was taught. The veins in his arm thumped and turned bright red, all like rivers making their way to his hand, where from his palm grew a shining red ball that then transformed into a tamed

flame. He was to hold it there for two minutes, let the magic in his arm relax slowly by second until it disappeared along with the flame, and his arm was free for now until a couple of more minutes for his next turn.

“There, all done.”

Everyone was seated and thus their digging could begin. They all gathered plates and served themselves, some already hasting into biting, dirtying the blanket, the grass and themselves.

What savages, Roderich thought.

At least they were all enjoying from their snacking, all until Ludwig felt a sudden burn, ones that were constant ever since his activation. He winced and dropped a strawberry, shaking his hand as if trying to turn off a blazing fire on his hand. It truly felt like it.

“I hate this so much,” he complained, going to the breathing exercises they had taught him for when this happened.

“Well, if a certain set of children hadn’t gone and met with their own Jack before time, this wouldn’t have happened,” Roderich reminded, always something that brought sour faces to both Ludwig and Feliciano.

“It’s still a really stupid law,” Ludwig hoped to defend himself.

“How can it be stupid when it prevents from this happening. It’s done for your safety.”

“You spend time with Erzsébet just fine."

“The activations are different in Clubs. You’re lucky that you even have a chance to meet with your Queen. Alfred here,” he pointed to him just as he was trying to eat a whole jar of marshmallows in one swallow. He was stopped by an angry glare from Erzsébet. “Won’t meet his Queen until his year of arising."

“My queen hasn’t even been born yet,” Francis added. Ludwig did not know how that would work, since the Diamond prince is already fourteen years old. “Don’t worry, in Diamonds, the King and Queen are not to wed, but the King does need to have a guardianship to the Queen, sort of like a teacher,” he explained before the prince got any wrong ideas.

“It’s just the way the Aces settled everything when this world was created,” Erszèbet said, her more gentile voice enough to calm any hostility that might grow over these differences.

“Well, when I’m king, I’m going to talk to them myself and make them change things,” he pouted, which only received laughter from many of them. “I’m serious."

“Just as I’m serious about marking Roderich’s ass with a Joker symbol,” Gilbert joked, which earned another round of laughter and a glare from his cousin.

“I think it’s a great idea!” Alfred interjected. “I will talk to the gods as well. When I’m king, maybe I can get them to give me super strength!” He glowed.

“The Kings our gods will be counting on,” Roderich rolled his eyes.

“What our people will be counting on,” Erszèbet added.

“Can I also ask the gods for something when I’m Queen?” Feliciano asked.

“Of course you can!”

“Ludwig, it does not work like that!”

“When I’m King, I’ll make it illegal for you to speak.”

Erzsébet laughed while Roderich looked purely insulted.

“You wouldn’t dare!”

“I would!”

“It would still need another acceptance from your Queen."

“He already has my acceptance then!”

“Do not treat this like a game!”

“We would play games all day when I’m King!”

Alfred applauded to that.

“Being a King will not depend on playing."

“I’ll make it so when I am.”

Roderich was honestly getting tired of this. He was about to say more words on the matter, make Ludwig realize and put him in his place, but a sudden movement caught all their attention. The presence of a St. Mark lion, beautiful lion creatures with wings, natural to the Hearts Kingdom, but yet still so rare to encounter. Once they noticed it, they all hurriedly stood up and begged for a look. Francis made sure none got too close to it and surprisingly they all behaved and stayed put, the sounds only those of wonderment and intrigue as they saw it feed from a nice area of grass and water from a near river.

“Those boys, they will have the kingdom destroyed like this,” Roderich commented to Erzsébet, both still remaining in their spot by the picnic.

“Roderich, they’re all just teenagers and children for now. They’ll realize their true duties in the future, but for now, just let them be, let them dream and hope for what they can have. It will get them to work harder in the future,” Erszèbet explained, taking what was Ludwig and Feliciano’s resting spot by the tree for herself now. It was indeed comfortable.

“It’s still a nuisance to know that these will be the people I will be working with in the future."

“You say it like you’re the only one who’s going to do his job.”

“I will do what I can to make it properly.”

“And I’m sure they will too. Just give them the time to mature and grow.”

Roderich trusted her words for now, gazing over to the pact of children who still gazed on to the creature. They were all so innocent, a scene of peace and color, of fairytales and not the worrying future ahead of them.

Yes, Erszèbet was right, they should enjoy it for now, things were not always going remain like this.

Chapter End Notes

When I was writing that last part, I kept thinking about ‘I just can’t wait to be a king’ I’m blasting it on my ears as I write this.

EDITED: On 23.10.2024

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

> It indeed took me some time to update. I was extremely busy dealing with final tests and projects, plus Eurovision that week ago really distracted me from working at all on this. But today I officially ended my classes, which means more time to write…that is if I don't get other distractions. I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was such a pretty cake. Tall, big, coated in a special vanilla fondant made to look like marble. Golden chocolate flowers sprinkled around it, Feliciano tempted to take one of those into his mouth. He couldn't. He had already taken a sample as he had helped make it with his mother. Even still, he couldn't wait to cut into it and indulge from the chocolate and fruit mix inside. Preparations went around him and yet only the well-presented cake was what mattered. Too distracted he was by it that he though no one would notice if he neared to take a flower.

"Feliciano!" His mother scolded, joining him by the large table to place some decorating chocolate coins. "You already had enough this morning. If you want more, you have to wait till we sing you happy birthday."

"It looks so yummy, I couldn't hold myself."

Renata chuckled. She handed him a chocolate coin for now, which he gladly took and was already unwrapping.

While his mother continued decorating the table with his birthday cake, Feliciano decided on helping two maids who were placing some curtains on a corner of the gazebo.

"You don't have to do this, Feli," one said as Feliciano tied it down with a beautiful bow.

"It's all right! I don't mind!" He told ecstatically, really trying to prove he had no problem with offering help.

He ran all around the area as he helped on different maids and servants, with great dedication and happiness, surely the glee that came with it being his ninth birthday.

He was helping someone light up a chandelier in the halls when an informant came in his horse.

"The King is approaching. He'll be in our home along with his family in a matter of minutes."

“It’s quite early to already be having guest,” Renata said as she gazed around the feast.

There were still so many things that needed to be done. It was in no state to accept the King of Hearts.

“We told him so, but he seems rather insisting on coming.”

She groaned, but there was nothing else she could do. King Aldrich will just have to do with the ongoing preparations for his arrival.

“All right then, well, Feli-” she turned towards him but didn’t find him at all in the spot he was just at merely seconds ago. She turned all around her and nothing. It was like he had suddenly disappeared. “Feliciano?” She called. No response. Where did he go?

A bright ball of light gleamed all throughout the carriage. The source came from one Ludwig currently held in the palm of his hand. His fingers moved to intensify it, to make little rays dance around it, stretching all around in swirls and some of them trying to form into beautiful flowers. Ludwig still needed to keep training to be able to do that.

Everyone in the carriage was deeply impressed, but Ludwig couldn’t hold it for long, and like the blowing of a flame, it was gone, his hand now pulsing in light, paining him. He held to it as he breathed in, and quickly it all disappeared and he settled back into his seat, already tired.

“You’re improving,” Aldrich complimented him, an actual smile forming on his lips.

Ludwig smiled back proud, his hand back to normal, no trace of the magic he just used.

“Not falling as breathless as he used to,” his grandmother noticed.

“And your abilities have improved greatly. At this rate, you can definitely-”

“Start the next part of your training,” Aldrich interrupted his daughter, brightness in his face that no one understood the reason for.

Only Louis seemed to know, quickly settling her gaze outside to the landscape of the Italian province, as if to hide or avoid hearing what Aldrich could be telling their grandson.

“The next part?” Ludwig questioned.

“Yes.” Aldrich took a quick glance to the window to see how close they were to the Valenti home, noticing it appear in the distance.

He had never been this hesitant to arrive.

“Ludwig, you’re a growing boy, and in a matter of a few years, you won’t be a child any longer.”

Ludwig saddened, head down, hands intertwined on his lap, a haunting realization falling over him.

“You’ll be a man, a king, with power from the gods and a beautiful queen at your side to your disposal, that is if Feliciano continues to be remarkably like his mother.”

To Ludwig it felt like he was addressing his best friend and his own mother as just an object to own, which he completely disliked and was about to comment on it, but a strong gaze from his mother halted him from starting. He settled yet again, sat loyally and silent as his grandfather would want him for the rest of this conversation.

“In this particular part of your training, we’ll already be teaching you the ways of the Kings."

“I thought that was only meant for my year of arising."

“The early activation of your power has brought the decision to begin. Not only will you continue to practice your power and magic, but we will also need to strengthen your body for the new increase it will get.”

Ludwig gripped his arm tight, worried over what new pain that could mean.

“Not just physically, but your mind must begin to go with these changes as well. You have to begin to act more respectfully and responsible, leave behind your childish ways. They’ll offer you no chances of moving ahead."

“Ho-how will I be able to do that?” He asked.

“You’ll learn yourself,” was his only reply after a long thinking silence.

And that silence continued, an aura of haunt spreading throughout the carriage, surely from Ludwig, who looked still as uneasy, quivering and tightening his hold upon himself, as if he was trying to hold himself from crying out the great worry he felt.

“Ludwig." Aldrich moved close, thinking of a way to try and ease him, but their closer approach to the Valenti’s home made any comforting words leave his mind. Even if he did have them, he had never been good at this. It was always something he usually let his wife or daughter deal with. But now, both these women were just as uneased, worried for their little boy of course, who was now soon to face the adult world before he should. Going to the Valenti house reminded them of his joy, of his freedom, of a chance that his childhood could live forever.

Knowing what Aldrich was going to tell Augusto today was like coming to destroy it, and now beginning the coming of a new stage of their life.

“I want you to really enjoy what time you have left with Feliciano."

Ludwig raised his head suddenly, concern much more intense than the one he just felt.

“What do you mean time left?”

Aldrich didn't answer, he didn't know how he could explain it to him at that moment.

"Feliciano is a precious friend to you, one that you should treasure every moment with. But now especially, you should more than ever," he told him sincerely, placing a hand on his shoulder, to calm him down over this new stress. "Do not worry so much, it is still not yet."

What was not yet? Ludwig asked to himself. Why was his grandfather telling him all this? What was everyone in the carriage so worried about? Why was he feeling so scared?

"Calm down, Ludwig, calm down, nothing to-"

"Ciao, tutti!" Feliciano appeared suddenly on their window, hanged from the side of the carriage and everyone started screaming.

The carriage shook and to the surprise of many, Feliciano still held on as it soon entered the gates. It went back to its easy pace while everyone in the carriage was taking back their breath and trying to calm down from the future Queen's suddenness.

"Feliciano! What in the world?!" Aldrich exclaimed, fearing he had just gotten a heart attack from his surprise.

"Mamma said you were coming and I wanted to be the first one to say hi."

The rest groaned, but for once after Aldrich had begun speaking to him, Ludwig smiled and laughed as he usually did with Feliciano.

"Well at least get down from there before you get hurt." He helped him to get down and had him join them inside for what remained.

It was rather quick, for in a matter of seconds they had stopped and a servant had come to open their door. As soon he did, both the young prince and Feliciano rushed off into the home.

"Come on! You have to see what Nonno gave me for my birthday!" Feliciano shouted, and they disappeared into the home before the rest could even place a foot on Valenti ground.

Aldrich was the only one who groaned at such behavior, but the rest smiled on. Louis and Monika were glad to have the Valenti home in silence, surely time to speak to Renata peacefully before the guests began coming in and they would have various more children running the land and shouting as eagerly as Ludwig and Feliciano.

"Antonio here?" Gilbert asked the servant who came for them.

"He's helping with the preparations."

Gilbert rushed to find him.

"And Augusto?" Aldrich asked.

“In the study room, your majesty,” he bowed and led a hand to the hall he was to take if he wanted to reach him.

Aldrich wasted no time in coming in, much to the startlement of many servants who did not expect the king to come so early. They bowed and fixed things rather messily for him, but Aldrich didn’t give them any sort of glance or attention. He had a goal for the night and nothing was going to stop him from bringing the fated question.

The glass with wine he had in his hand was delicious, exquisite, sweet, a bit of sour that didn’t damage the overall taste. It was a bottle from the year his daughter was born, harvested right in their fields and kept in their large cellars. He was proud of the wine label his family owned, proud to have worked for it, proud for the fame they held not just in the province, but the Hearts Kingdom and the others. He wished he could take more often from the ones of that year, but he promised to only drink for certain special occasions. His grandson’s ninth birthday was a sufficient excuse, and thus he enjoyed from it alone in his study, immersed in the silence before the feast truly began.

His study was a comfortable one, for his work, but also to relax. Sometimes he would catch Ludwig and Feliciano taking a nap there, or maybe Lovino. He did have some comfortable sofas there for them to take, the right colors, dim lighting and a great view to their fields and beyond to the forest and mountains. The windows were large enough to showcase everything to Augusto, making him feel like he ruled upon it all with his own throne. He noticed from there the ongoing preparations, the figures of his daughter and Princess Monika, conversing together as they helped each other with table preparations.

Princess Monika? What was she doing here so early? If she was here, then that meant- there was a knock at his door and already he had an idea of who it could be.

“It’s open,” he called, and instantly the large doors revealed the King of Hearts.

He arrived alone, with no announcing guards. Silent, stoic and serious as ever. This time it was powerful though, like a force that could make the whole house fall silent if he wished.

Was something wrong? Augusto though. Nothing that a glass of wine could not cure.

He took an empty and clean glass from a drawer and offered it up to him, pointing to the label of the wine so the King could see that this was indeed fine and he should take a chance from it now that he had it opened and was even willing to share. Aldrich seemed to ignore it, he took a seat next to him and settled with watching over to the view in silence. Augusto settled along and stared as the feast soon began to take life.

Guests arrived, servants began bringing in trays of snacks and drinks, music started and couples already joined in dances. Renata had changed into a beautiful dress and had caught the eyes of many, which in turn got her husband to remain by her side throughout it. Augusto had giggled upon the rim of his glass when he noticed.

He caught his youngest grandson and his beloved friend running into the desserts table to take their probably twentieth chocolate coin, running off before anyone noticed they did. Augusto laughed and pointed to the scene, yet Aldrich remained as indifferent.

No matter, no problem with laughing alone.

“Nine years old,” Aldrich finally spoke.

“Mhm, nine years old. We are here, and my boy is still lovely, healthy and with hope to continue on." He raised his glass to Aldrich, and the king, to please him, poured a small amount of wine and raised his own.

“For many more years for them. The Kingdom is in good hands,” and they toasted, Augusto wasting no time in taking his drink all in one gulp.

Aldrich only swiveled it and placed the glass back on the desk. Surely Augusto would take it afterwards.

“He’ll be turning ten next year.”

Dread settled, one so intense that Augusto suddenly found no good taste in his excellent wine, yet he continued taking it as to show that he was unfazed.

“And you know what will happen on his tenth birthday, right?” Aldrich's gaze was intense on him and Augusto was slightly scared to look towards it.

“There’s still a year left,” he tried to defend.

“A year for us to prepare and decide."

“We can decide this later."

“I want to decide now, Augusto," Aldrich commanded, with a harshness and control that Augusto knew he could not go against, could not escape. Now was the time to choose.

“Why not better speak to his father or mother about this?”

“You are still the patriarch of the family and the one with more knowledge when it comes to this. You worked in the castle and know what I went through with Louis. You know what would be best for your grandson, as well as for the kingdom. The decision depends on you.”

Yet Augusto did not answer, did not share a glance and lay pensive, surely maddened over the haste the King wanted his answer.

“Tell me, will my grandson marry yours? Will we go through with the engagement?”

No answer was given, for the other old man still though on.

Augusto noticed Ludwig and Feliciano, eating their chocolate coins hidden from everyone else, talking and laughing, surely thinking of ways they could take more without getting in

trouble.

“I do not know, Aldrich, things can change in ten years."

“Yet in nine years these two grew a bond that makes them inseparable to this day. Surely it would remain as such for when they take the throne. It would be ideal. For the first time in centuries we have a Queen from the Italian province who already holds a dear relationship with his King. It is surely a sign of what is to come. The Kingdom could be at a prosperous height like it had been when Romulus was at the throne.”

A chance like this was something to be compared to ancient prophecies or legends.

“What if they’re not?”

“They will be, there is no questioning it.”

And yet no clear answer from Augusto, still lost in his choice.

“Don’t act as if you never knew I would come to ask you this one day."

“It’s…” his emotions took the better of him. He looked to his adoring grandchild, a baby still in his eyes. He could almost hear his childish laughter even with the commotion of the party and the barrier of the glass. “I feel like I’m already sending him away to grow up."

“They won’t marry until they’re twenty-one. You still have plenty of time to spend what’s left of his childhood and the coming of his adolescence.”

But it would be different. He knew that accepting this meant taking away something dear from Feliciano.

“Their marriage will make the Kingdom stronger. You know accepting this is the right choice, so stop the hesitation and make your answer clear already," he shushed and didn’t continue. What he said should be enough to convince him.

Still no words, only continuous thinking that Augusto knew he had to slowly take away his feelings out of.

Feliciano would be a good Queen, same for Ludwig when it came to being King, marriage or not. He knew that the union would give an extra strength to their power, a power that would also be given to their land. The richness they would be given would be something that could even reach further than any of the other kingdoms could. It would be the best for both Ludwig and Feliciano, the best for his crops and lands, the best for his people. Aldrich was right, in nine years they surely showcased their friendship, who knows what their mature union could do, and if they fell in love…Augusto let a chuckle escape.

Looking down upon them, there was no doubt that such feelings would reach them in the future.

For once he looked upon Aldrich, a confident smile, away from the concern he had felt, now replaced with the promise of true love to his grandson. A love that he knew would prove

faithful, powerful and loyal to his Queen.

Augusto offered his hand. “I approve of their engagement.”

Aldrich grinned himself, taking Augusto’s hand in a shake.

It was decided.

They had enough of the chocolate coins, plus their mothers were already suspecting since they ate very few of their dinner. But once they were free, the lands of the house were theirs, where they ran and looked upon whatever scenery the night offered them. Ludwig was currently trying to help Feliciano climb to a thick branch from a tree, to just sit and stare on to the heights of the house, truly feeling like they were already given the thrones to their kingdom.

It was at his turn to come up that he noticed from his stand Augusto and his own grandfather coming out from the house to join in the festivities. They seemed quite happy, Aldrich managing a chuckle here and there as Augusto patted him in the back and lead him across the party. It reminded him of the stories his grandmother or mother would tell him about how close those two always were, some comparing it to Ludwig and Feliciano themselves. Yet Ludwig didn’t smile, if anything it only got him to worry more, to bring back the sadness that Feliciano had made him forget.

“Ludwig,” Feliciano had called carefully, noticing easily the expression on his face. He leaned closer to the trunk, hoping to reach him from his height. “Is something wrong?” He asked, his eyes meeting with his, a gaze enough to calm him like stable water without a ripple.

Ludwig shook his head and climbed up to join Feliciano on his side, both now steady and looking over to the lights of the feast.

“Opa, he was saying some…weird things in the carriage on the way here."

“What kind of things?”

Ludwig didn’t know how he could explain it to Feliciano without worrying him in turn and a dreadful silence settled as Ludwig though about what he could tell him. Feliciano didn’t mind it, he had a great view to distract him, the wind, and the swaying of his feet in the air from up high.

“He said something about, you know, growing up, and he said I have to enjoy…what’s left of our time together.”

Feliciano stopped his swaying and switched his entire gaze to him, panic in his big eyes.

“Time left? What did he mean by that?” His question begged, inching closer, maintaining close to Ludwig before someone close dared separate him.

“I don’t know, he didn’t say."

“Ma-maybe he was just saying that."

“I hope so.”

Ludwig leaned over a near branch, the worry ever so present, one that Feliciano understood and easily saw now. He leaned himself, but as he did, he took Ludwig’s hand in a reassuring hold.

“Whatever it is, in a way, he is right. We should enjoy our time together,” he smiled, just enough to return joy to Ludwig’s own expression. “We are going to be growing up soon, and maybe he meant that we should enjoy from our time as we are now.”

Ludwig chuckled, leaning himself close to Feliciano, their thighs pressed together.

“I doubt much is going to change,” he laughed.

“I hope it never does,” Feliciano laughed in turn.

How he wished Ludwig would always laugh like that in the future.

Chapter End Notes

EDITED: On 23.10.2024

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

I wish I could always update this quick. I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was the morning of his tenth birthday, but Feliciano had awakened to it like any other.

Sunshine came through the window, a light that Feliciano always managed to lay under even in his deep sleep. Because of the heat, as he grew older, he began getting used to the idea of sleeping naked, letting the sun tan more of his skin. His mother would beg him to at least wear underwear, for the servants may sometimes barge in unknowingly. That favor he at least granted, but at the moment, it was such a nuisance and he was close to getting it off and throwing it over to a corner. He really should, before they awakened him and got him ready for his- that's when he remembered.

He suddenly sat up, wide awake, easily shaking off any sleep he held.

It was his birthday. He glowed like the very sun that shone on him from the window.

He picked up a large white shirt that belonged to his grandfather and dealt with it for now. He stood, headed out his room and rushed excitedly to the kitchen. His family would always greet his birthday mornings with a nice breakfast, plus the menu of whatever they were planning to make for the day, which he would always help along with his brother.

He slid into the kitchen for an entrance, raising his hands and waiting for the congratulations and praises. He was met with silence instead. Only two maids were present in the kitchen, preparing drinks and filling them into their more prestige cups that they only used when important people like the King came. They were so immersed with their work they didn't even notice the young master come in.

Feliciano looked about the counters and chairs and saw no presence of his family or even a small plate with scribbled 'Buon Cumpleanno' of hazelnut chocolate over his treat.

Maybe they were somewhere else.

He headed out into the halls, the same servants working on cleaning, fixing everything but not really placing any elaborate decorations like they would in any of his birthday parties. Usually at this hour they were filled with commotion and hurry, even preparing the gardens. He took a quick glance to those very doors that lead to them, they were shut tight and through the windows he saw no presence of anybody outside.

Did they all forget it was his birthday?

He heard footsteps approaching down from the stairs and they were from his mother, still clothed in her sleeping gown. “Ah, there you are. I came to wake you and you weren’t there in your room."

“Mamma, you do know it’s my birthday right?” He instantly asked.

“Of course I do, why would I forget?”

“Then you should get people to prepare for the party. Also I’m hungry, and you didn’t make me something this morning.”

She bit her lips and avoided his stare, leaning down slightly to move messy curled hair out of his face.

“We’re doing something different this year, mio caro."

“Different? Are we going somewhere?”

“No.” There were no other words she could use to explain for now. “But come on, let’s get you ready for when Ludwig comes." She stood and lead him a hand for him to take, heading towards his room.

Feliciano didn’t object, excited that at least Ludwig would come as he normally did.

He didn’t get why he was dressed as nicely as his mother had insisted. Nobody was arriving and it seemed like only Ludwig and his family were coming. When he headed out, the house continued as it normally did when he woke up that morning. His family though, came dressed as if they were heading to a ball…or a funeral. The atmosphere was rather somber, sad expressions shown on every face, even on Lovino’s and he himself didn’t understand what was going on either. They all stood at the base of the stairs, right by the entrance, waiting for Ludwig surely. Feliciano wanted to take from some of the snacks they were preparing in their meeting room, but was held in place by his grandfather.

“What are we waiting for?” He asked.

“For Ludwig,” Augusto easily answered.

“But why like this?” Feliciano was never answered.

They kept waiting in silence, and no movement was given from them until they all heard the approaching carriage. By the sound of it, it didn’t seem like one at all, but plenty. Maybe they were all the guests to his party, Feliciano though excitedly. He wanted to rush forward to the window and see for himself, but his grandfather’s tight grip did not let any such movement. He heard various footsteps, horses calling and the rushing of fabric against the floor, but it was all silent, not a single whisper escaping into his ear.

The doors finally opened, and Feliciano had light up, ready to run forward and give Ludwig his usual welcoming hug. Instead, a line of twelve robed old men and women came. They

passed them without a care, heading forward to the meeting room, the only one the servants had been preparing for the day. Feliciano looked carefully, wanting to greet them somehow, wash the silent stares and expressions they held. He tried smiling towards many of them, but it was left ignored. Despite what Feliciano considered to be rudeness, their robes were extravagantly beautiful, the red of their kingdom incrusted with symbols of hearts in gold, flowing behind them like curtains or the veil of a bride.

After they all settled inside, a lone figure came next, that of the Jack of Hearts. He came dressed in his finest wear, something that Feliciano knew they only wore for the most important occasions. He didn't mind at all bowing to him as his family had done. He knew the Jack of Hearts was a figure of respect to be compared to the very King and Queen, especially after it was a person that he was only seeing and meeting for the first time.

He bowed in turn to them and then left forward to the same room the others had gone to. Then, finally, the King and Queen entered, Aldrich holding the same tightening grasp on Ludwig as Augusto held on Feliciano. They were all dressed in their supreme royal wear, crowns adorning their heads, the richest fabrics in red of course, jewels and gold on them and looking up high like they would to any of the subjects below them. Ludwig, who looked rather uncomfortable with his cape, sashes, tightening clothes and miniature crown on his head, only managed to ignore it when he finally saw Feliciano. They both smiled and were ready to run to each other, but their families didn't dare let them move an inch unless they said so.

For the first time ever, they all bowed towards the royal family like they were total strangers. It was something odd to both Ludwig and Feliciano, who had gotten used to hugs, kisses, handshakes even, all throughout their lives. Even if this was supposed to be a formal greeting, to them it felt so out of place and improper. They couldn't question any longer as they in turn were brought over to the room.

All furniture that was once there was moved to the sides, only but two chairs in the center, in front of it some utensils of blessings and rituals that they usually only saw in churches. What stood out the most was a simple red ribbon, tied by a sort of white sash and only to be broken when it would be ready to be used. The twelve old men and women and the Jack were all standing in front of an altar they had moved from the chapel in the Valenti home, a good distance away from the chairs that were prepared. Family began accommodating around the room, making sure to not step into the center at all.

"Go on and sit boys," Renata told them sweetly, giving them quite a relief and confidence after the rather hanging atmosphere that was above them.

Hesitantly, afraid and slow, they moved towards the chairs, so untrustworthy of them that they even patted the base to make sure nothing was wrong with them. Seeing as nothing happened, they both took their seat, a close distance to each other at least. Being next to each other always made them feel more secured about unknown things such as this.

The old men and women, along with the Jack, Queen and King settled in a conversation between themselves, the rest of their families attending to what they were saying. At Ludwig and Feliciano's distance, they could not hear at all.

“Do you know what all of this is?” Feliciano finally managed to ask, keeping quiet so no attention was brought to them.

“I have no idea. Nobody wants to tell me anything. What about you?”

“Neither.”

They both looked around them for a clue, but Ludwig used the time to loosen the hold his collar had on his neck. It was then that Feliciano actually noticed what he was wearing, admiring it’s design, the colors, how they suited well on Ludwig’s form. Feliciano couldn’t believe that he was thinking that it was handsome on him. He chuckled, one that had caught Ludwig’s attention.

“What?” He wondered.

“You look really nice, Ludwig.”

With that smile, those admiring eyes, Ludwig had flushed red, nervous that it just got him to pull his collar more.

“I-It’s n-not m-much.”

Feliciano found it extremely adorable at how nervous he suddenly got.

“I usually wear things like this back at the palace. You though...”

What Feliciano wore was much simpler compared to what he adorned. He had a loose red jacket over him in their usual reds, with beautifully encrusted golden flowers and vines, surely a white blouse underneath, simple red pants, a rich belt with Heart symbols, black little boots with gold and reds decorating it and a simple little red roses flower crown on his head, common for awaiting Queens at Feliciano’s age. Once again Ludwig had flushed, for he admitted that even at how simple it was, it fitted Feliciano and made him stand out beautifully. “L-lo-look amazing.”

It was Feliciano’s turn to become as red as their kingdom color, but he still smiled shyly, making sure that his own crown was still on his head as his mother had placed it.

“Th-thanks,” he giggled, and Ludwig upon seeing it, admitted that no smile could ever be as adoring to him.

The rest of the adults suddenly moved, the Jack and the old men and women taking their place behind the altar, surely whatever they were talking about done.

“We may begin,” the Jack announced.

The twelve men and women instantly bowed, made hand gestures and a symbol appeared magically before them, one Ludwig recognized as a very ancient Hearts symbol, probably the very first one. After the symbol disappeared, it’s very sparks light up some candles they had placed around them. They waited until the fires turned fully red before they began humming. The sound was enough of a tremble to cause the home to shake, eerie and menacing, a very

ritualistic feeling to it, much more than any of their churches had done. It scared the two future monarchs, who wanted nothing than to hold each other as comfort. The Jack glared at them not to.

He waited until the men and women reached a certain hum before he opened a large book before him and began reciting a Latin scripture. It sounded very old, some words here and there that Feliciano could recognize for he knew slightly the language for it being the root to Italian.

He heard: Gods, Hearts, spirit, soul, union, red, promise, engagement, marriage, ring, gifts, ten years, arising, throne, crowns, king, queen, and heirs. He could make no sense of what it meant though.

It went on for many minutes, to the point of being tiring to the children. Constant gazes from their families was what worked to keep them awake, to maintain them straight in their chairs as the chanting continued.

It began getting louder, the old men and women slowly giving themselves space, and as they did, the Jack moved forward, still chanting in the old language. He brought the book forward with him, easing in a closeness to the children that seemed even predatory. They wanted to move back, they wanted to run, for they felt an invisible force on them. It wasn't painful or harmful, but it just felt odd and fearful when they didn't have a clue about what was going on. They looked all around each other to find a source, seeming to come from the chant of the men and women.

The Jack was upon them, suddenly falling silent, heavy eyes on the future rulers, examining them, just as the chanters in the back began to silence. Once it had died down, the Jack closed the book, kneeled down and took the red tied ribbon. He mentioned some words under his breath and the white sash that kept it tied burned into disappearance. Instantly it was free, extended long for the Jack to tie as he wished.

"Offer your hands," he commanded them, and the young boys obeyed, instantly and synchronized, just as the Jack liked it.

He tied one end on Ludwig's wrist, the other on Feliciano's own. He made sure they were kept tight before he moved back. The old men and women began to chant once again, the Jack opened the book and joined them in their calling. This time, the force around them was more intent, even shaking the room. No wonder the servants had emptied it out of everything. They were surprised the older members of their family could stay so still, while they began to panic, tears already brimming on Feliciano's eyes. Ludwig tried to reach a hand to comfort him.

"Do not dare!" The Jack shouted in between chants, much louder, his eyes shining and his voice changing differently, like someone else had come to take his body. The fear Ludwig felt from it was enough to keep him still for the rest of it, no matter how nervous Feliciano got.

Finally, the red ribbon disappeared completely in a puff, in smoke that covered well the two boys. They shut their eyes, the fear too much to even see what had occurred. All the chanting stopped, the shaking subsided and a sudden calm was brought that the two boys confided in.

Slowly, along with the disappearing mist, they opened their eyes to whatever change was brought.

Nothing, nothing had changed, there was just something that was added.

It was a faint red mark on their ring finger, circled around in a Hearts mark, a crown symbol of a heart in the very center facing them. Both of them were identical, but the boys began comparing them to see if any slight difference was available.

The Jack closed the book in a loud bang, a proud smile on his face. “The Aces have approved of this union,” he announced.

Everyone, even the old men and women, smiled greatly and began applauding, some of their family members even jumped in excitement. Ludwig and Feliciano did not know what that meant but they smiled back to them nervously.

“Ludwig Beilschmidt and Feliciano Valenti are to be wedded at the palace eleven years from now. They are engaged to one another, blessed by the very Aces and nothing will be able to annul it. A ten year gap must start as soon as possible. May this union truly be the best for our kingdom.”

Everyone applauded and the Jack and the old men and women began their cleaning, wanting to now join the dinner the household had prepared for them.

With all these movements, Ludwig and Feliciano could not find it in them to move themselves. They were frozen into place, repeating the words the Jack just said.

Wedded? Engaged? They’re going to get married?

They knew about this possibility, they always knew that at some point such decision would be made. But they were distracted in themselves, in their games, in their times and their overall friendship to truly think about that possibility. They though that their families would see that this was not meant for a marriage, that what they had was not really meant for something much more. But it didn’t seem to work. Their families decided on the marriage, and they knew that sooner or later it was to come to them and that would be the type of union they would rule the kingdom in.

They headed to dinner, probably the most uneventful birthday dinner Feliciano had ever had, not even a cake or a candle to sing him happy birthday. It felt like any other boring formal dinner where the adults talked about topics that mattered nothing to them. Not even a conversation with Ludwig would cheer him up, seeing as Ludwig remained just as pensive as he was. No doubt the same thoughts were in their minds.

Now that they were engaged, what was going to happen next? Could they continue as they were knowing that such a fated ceremony was to come to them, surely to change the friendship they had grown together?

They dared finally look upon each other and in that moment, all worry disappeared. They smiled, they laughed and had their dinner as messily as they always did when they were

together.

They were still the same. They still wanted to gorge themselves on the gelato, they still wanted to try and run the fields, run the near forests, visit the villages and meet with new creatures they had never seen before. They still wanted to climb trees, they wanted to laugh, they wanted to talk on about anything on their stays, all the way to the dawn of the next morning. Truly, nothing had changed. So what if now they were engaged? Shouldn't they be as ecstatic as the rest? At least they could remain together, at least they had a future where things could continue as they are. They had each other, and that's what mattered. No matter what forceful union was made on them, it was still enough to never separate them.

Feliciano couldn't have the party he wanted, but he at least was permitted to spend it with Ludwig around what was left of the night.

They settled in one of the study rooms, playing some board games Augusto had for them. It was much better doing this then going downstairs and hearing all the adults talk about wedding decorations already.

"Here they are," they heard Renata, who opened the door to the study room to reveal them to Ludwig's grandfather.

"It's time to go, Ludwig." Both Renata and Aldrich moved hurriedly downstairs to prepare for their farewells.

"You should ask them to stay over," Feliciano giggled.

"I should, shouldn't I?" He laughed as well, helping Feliciano to save their game and place it in its usual shelf.

They ran downstairs arm in arm, skipping and wanting to sing songs, but it being late, they would surely be scolded. When they headed to the entrance, they were surprised to still have the old men and women, along with the Jack, Queen and King of Hearts and the rest of their families there. They usually never bid farewell like this. It tended to only be Feliciano and Ludwig with just their own parents.

Once the Jack and the old men and women saw the future royal pair reach the end of the stairs, the door was opened and they began to head out.

"Come on, ask them!" Feliciano pushed Ludwig.

"I will, I will," he chuckled, coming close to Aldrich.

He pulled on his cape to get his attention, a bright look on his face, hoping that it would be enough for his grandfather to accept.

"Ludwig, you should be saying good bye to Feliciano."

"Actually, I was meaning to ask if I could stay over for the night."

And the room went dreadfully silent. Eyes turned away, gleeful faces turned sour and some just left outside to their respective carriage. Ludwig did not understand this sudden reaction, but remained as bright to his grandfather. He still wanted to convince him.

“I’m sorry Ludwig, but it cannot be permitted."

“Why not? It’s Feliciano’s birthday."

“Still, I cannot let you."

“But I’m always staying over. Why is now such a big difference?”

“Ludwig, a gap of ten years needs to begin tonight."

“A gap? What do you mean a gap?”

Both the boys grew fearful, and the rest could only but stay put and see how the boys would react. Aldrich steadied himself, took a breath, stood high, wanting to make it clear to his grandson.

“When an engagement is set, the Aces ask for gap years between the chosen couple. It is for them to grow and mature without the other, so their childhood feelings could separate from those of their adult feelings. As so, Ludwig, you won’t meet with Feliciano again until your year of arising in ten years.”

Both Ludwig and Feliciano were left stunned, Ludwig already on the brink of tears.

“Wha-what?”

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Now go on, say goodbye.”

Ludwig refused to. He quickly let go of Aldrich and began moving back. Feliciano moved closed to him as well, not daring to give them all the chance to pry them off each other.

“N-no, no!” He challenged, shouting back.

It was disrespectful and Aldrich would not stand for this. “Ludwig…” he started, controlling any urge to scream at him or pull him by the hair out.

“I’m not leaving!” He shouted again.

“Please, carino,” Renata tried to ease somehow.

“No, no, no, no, no,” Feliciano cried, holding on to Ludwig tightly by his arm. “Mamma, please don’t let him leave!”

“Darling, I can’t do any-”

“Please, please, Signora Valenti!” Ludwig begged in turn to her.

Aldrich disapproved greatly at how Renata was dealing with it, glaring at her to do this as forcefully as he intended. She could not dare, she tried to do what she could in calm, hoping it would get them to better understand. But how could she get them to? They weren’t announced or told by orders of the King. They couldn’t just expect them to leave and not see each other again for ten years after they had grown a friendship that was even dependable for them.

“Th-there’s really nothing I can do."

“Convince them."

“Please, mamma." And Feliciano was crying. She hated to see those tears on him.

“Please do something." And Ludwig joined him.

She couldn’t stand this any longer. Even she found that it was completely unfair.

“No words were given to them, they didn’t know, they weren’t expecting this,” she defended, standing in front of them like a shield from whatever wrath the king could bring. “It’s rather cruel to separate them suddenly like this. No amount of farewells tonight would be enough."

“The Aces ask for the gap years as soon as possible. I would not let Ludwig anger the gods over a silly friend."

“A silly friend who is to become Queen and he will marry, a union that we decided on and was accepted by the gods.” She grew angry. She would not have her son demeaned like that, not even from the king.

It was a surprise for the crowd there, who had never seen Renata suddenly grow enraged.

She took deep breaths and settled herself yet again, noticing the stares and not wanting to continue coming out as rude. No matter what she thought, or how selfish Aldrich was being, he was still a king she needed to show respect to.

“Leaving suddenly like this might cause implications to them in the future. It could affect their very relationship for the next time they meet, and we all know how that could affect our kingdom.”

Everyone in the room, from the old men and women to the very Queen understood what she meant and slowly fell at ease with what she could propose now. Renata remained in silence as she though well, both the boys eagerly looking up to her as a savior to a time that could be left to them.

“I’m asking for more time for them to truly say goodbye."

“How much time would that be?”

Renata though once again, calculating all amount of days in her head. “Nine days,” she suggested.

Aldrich though it despite the great disapproval shown in his face. He was close to denying her, but the Queen moved forward to place a hand on his shoulder, giving him a nod of approval to what Renata suggested. She pointed over to Ludwig, who looked absolutely destroyed. Reddened eyes, holding tight to Feliciano, who held the same tear stained face, a hold on their grandson jut as desperate. It truly shook the King and for once he realized how cruel indeed he was being. His expression eased, more relaxed, less fearful, and willing to offer a chance.

“Seven days,” he agreed on, “no less, no more. Seven days is what I permit.”

It was enough to halt the children’s tears, to loosen their hold on each other with trust now.

“Yes, your majesty," Renata bowed and agreed.

“They’ll be staying at my summer home, where I can watch over them for if they try to do anything suspicious.”

Yes, he was permitting this, but a strong glare remained on his eyes, especially on the children, as a warning that they shouldn’t dare try to go against the chance he was giving them.

“Thank you,” Renata bowed once again.

She turned away from the King and instead faced and leaned over to her son, counseling and trying to clean some of his tears with her dress.

“Come, let’s go pack for now. Ludwig, you can come too." She took Feliciano’s hand as they both nodded, heading up the stairs for those very quick preparations.

To Feliciano’s own surprise, he had never visited Ludwig’s summer home in the province. He knew it was where his family stayed for his visits to Italy, but it never occurred to ask him himself to go.

A quick carriage ride away and only a walking distance from their nearest village, it was smaller than what he expected would be for the royal family of Hearts. It looked extremely comfortable though, with enough space around to play or simply sit for a snack and enjoy. A good amount of trees covered the old brick walls, two simple floors and nothing of royal extravagancy to showcase. Feliciano couldn’t help but find it sweet, comfortable and already welcoming.

Ludwig helped Feliciano with getting down the trunk they had prepared for him, not only filled with clothes, but toys and games they could make use of for their last days together.

“It’s beautiful,” Feliciano complimented, especially taken by the many red roses that grew all over.

“Wait till you come inside." Ludwig took him by the hand, and while the other still held his trunk, Ludwig pushed them both forward inside, not having the patience to wait for his own family to get down from the carriage.

The servants they had here were few, just a maid who opened the door for the young prince and his friend and a cook. Inside felt just as homey, comfortable furniture and simple red fabrics, curtains and flags of the Hearts Kingdom, simple candles to light up the rooms and simple access halls to get everywhere with ease.

“The kitchen is that way, here’s the dining room, over there is vatti and mutti’s room,” he went on introducing every room to Feliciano, and he looked to every single one in wonderment.

They finally headed upstairs, which only held two rooms: Gilbert’s and Ludwig’s. Ludwig smashed his door open with the trunk, no minding the noise it made or that it could have even broken it.

“And this is my room,” he introduced ecstatically, extending his arms as a welcome to his best friend.

It was small, smaller than even Feliciano’s own room in his home. The bed was abnormally large, taking great space and only leaving room for some small shelves that held very few

toys and books. The only real true impressive thing were the large windows that gave out to the surrounding woods and the village in the distance. The moonlight that entered inside was enough to light it up without the help of candles or a flicker of Ludwig's still developing power. Feliciano lay as impressed as if he was looking at a royal bedroom at the palace in Berlin. He instantly jumped over to the bed, with many blankets and pillows to loose themselves in.

"We can make a fort with all this," he suggested, already taking it in a pile to prepare.

"Oh! I have some string here." Ludwig pushed apart old toys, messing the floor as he picked up the string and helped Feliciano to hang some parts from the ceiling.

Once that was done, they took different items to decorate the inside; carpets, plush toys, even other pillows they took from Gilbert's room. When finished, they began reading and looking at some of the books Ludwig had in his room. They were short, and not at all as impressive as the ones Augusto held, but they were still interesting and kept the boys curious and looking all throughout the night. By the time Monika had come to check on them the next morning, they were fast asleep, cuddled together over their blankets and pillows, the fort still standing strong. She let them sleep a couple of more minutes while breakfast continued to be prepared, they'll want the energy for the rest of the day.

They truly used their last days to their maximum potential. They barely rested and made so much noise and havoc that it had King Aldrich wondering how Augusto and the rest of the Valenti could have possibly dealt with this every day.

For the sake of memory, they stole some pots from the kitchen and tried to attack a chicken and a goat that were among their land. They later got horribly scolded by the owner of those animals and Aldrich had sent them to Ludwig's room. That didn't stop them from jumping on the bed and trying to even crawl over the walls. Monika was afraid that they would actually punch a hole or even break down an entire wall.

They were lent horses and with Gilbert's guidance, were lead around the woods and had taken many visits to the village, where they helped the cook buy ingredients or get new books to learn from in the nights. They would play with other children in the village center or gaze over at the new sweets the village baker was working on. They made wishes in the fountain, desperate for the gods to change their minds about the gap years, but each day they were given a reminder and each day they would make use of their time, even if it meant singing random songs in the middle of the night and have the rest of the Beilschmidts groan loudly and shout at them to shut up and go back to sleep.

By their final day, they were exhausted and didn't even have enough energy to pick up roses and makes flower crowns with them. But they did try to make a cake in the kitchen, something that Ludwig had always wanted to do himself. The end result proved that he needed more practice, but they ate it with fake smiles and compliments.

"Next time, you should add more sprinkles," Feliciano suggested.

It was the late night, more tragically, their last night together. They lay comfortable beside each other, close, holding their hands tightly and staring up to the blankets that hung above them from their fort.

“Next time you see me, I’ll be so good at cake baking. I’ll make you a cake better than any of the ones they’ve made for your birthdays,” Ludwig told him, already imagining a ten storage tall one made of red and gold.

“You should make it for our wedding instead though,” Feliciano giggled as he leaned closer.

Ludwig blushed red, but smiled anyways, not hiding how…happy that actually made him. “I-I will! It-it will be th-the prettiest cake any wedding has seen!” He proclaimed, in such a way that made Feliciano laugh.

“Will we share a room then?”

“I think so, opa and oma do, I assume we will as well."

“Can I decorate?”

“But I want to help decorate!”

“We’ll decorate together then!” And they both agreed on that. “Have you seen that room?”

“I have. It’s pretty big, bigger than any we’ve had. The palace is right at the center of the city and really tall. We get one of the highest rooms and get an amazing view to all of Berlin.”

Feliciano’s eyes glowed imagining such a scene. What a blessing it would be to see it every day from the comfort of their own room.

“Will they let me paint?”

“I’ll prepare a spot just for you, with all the light you need and the best paints and brushes!” He was already thinking of visiting art shops.

“And you’ll paint with me right?”

Ludwig was already thinking of denying him, but Feliciano pouted.

“But I’m not good at it."

“You are good! And the next time we meet, you’ll be way better at it! And I’ll be really proud of you.”

Ludwig smiled sincerely and true, lovely to Feliciano, who wanted nothing than to paint that smile so he could forever keep.

“We’ll need a lot of inspiration, so you’ll take me around Berlin right?”

“I’ll show you everything! I’ll show you Germany, Japan, Iberia-”

“Are you going to show me all of Hearts?” Feliciano giggled, for it seemed Ludwig was ready to mention all the provinces he no doubt learned about.

“All of it!”

“And the rest of the kingdoms?”

“I promise.”

Feliciano was smiling so much that he had to even hide it, covered in Ludwig’s shoulder as he tried to calm the great happiness he felt.

“And we’ll cook, we’ll sing, we’ll dance-” he wanted to continue on, but a loud yawn made it clear that he was starting to get tired.

Ludwig himself was feeling the same, and their eyes were constantly flickering into sleep. But it was so hard when they still wanted to be awake with each other, still wanted to talk of promises and hope for a friendship that would remain even with ten years of absence.

“I’ll journey and see beyond the lines of our kingdom,
Never a fear to be lost, never a fear to fall,
In pleasure, I will take the mysteries of what I could meet,
If you accept to be mine, my Queen.”

Ludwig started to sing, a whisper only to Feliciano, not the annoying loud songs that they used to keep the entire household awake.

“No heat, no cold, will stop me of my search,
No sun, no rain to go against my strength,
Just promise me your hand,
And love me in our eternity.”

Ludwig hoped to sing it to keep them awake, but it was bringing such a calm that it worked more like a lullaby to force them into their sleep.

“My sun, my moon, my land, my love,
I know it’s a journey you will overcome,
But I don’t need you to go so far,
I want you here to kiss me.”

Feliciano began to sing, in the same whispering tone that Ludwig sang with, scooting even closer, resting his head by his neck, already his eyes in a close.

“Would you want all the gold I will find for you?
Would you like the songs I will bring from afar for you?
Would you accept me as your shield?
And would you want me always by your side?”

“I don’t want any of the riches you will bring,
I don’t care for any of the songs,

I only want you to hold,
I only want your arms around me."

Feliciano held tighter, and Ludwig brought his hand over to hold him just as the song sang, as both wanted, and only communicated through the melody that was very fitting for their soon goodbye.

"Bring me your love, your kisses, your loyalty,
Your passion, your hope, your defeat,
Your promise, your weakness, your strength,
I will keep it all in my heart.

I'll journey and see beyond the lines of our kingdom,
Never a fear to be lost, never a fear to fall,
In pleasure, I will take the mysteries of what I could meet,
If you accept to be mine, my King."

They sang together to its end, by then the music working its effect of shutting them into their sleep. They held to each other as tightly as they were still awake, with the blessing of the song they had danced and sang to many times as the years had passed. They hoped they would still continue to in their adulthood, never forgotten in the ten years that were to pass.

Feliciano was packed and ready, dressed as finely by Monika's insisting. Even with all the time they were given to truly say goodbye, it didn't really please Ludwig and Feliciano enough. Both held saddened expressions and a gloom that followed them throughout the remainder of the day as they spent it walking about the gardens, talking about all the things they would miss. It spread even to the rest of the Beilschmidts, who kept their gazes incredibly still on the boys, knowing that they wouldn't see such a union, such friendship and love again, and would miss seeing it. They knew the next time they would meet, things will be different.

A little joy was brought when the Valenti arrived in their own carriage, carrying an array of food trays to dine for the night. It was like a small feast, and it did bring a festive air that Ludwig and Feliciano celebrated to, telling stories, remembering old times, joining in dances, singing, playing games and Augusto even offered to carry Ludwig and Feliciano as he used to. Ludwig and Feliciano were ten years old, had definitely grown and had added weight that was now hard for Augusto to hold. He though he had broken a bone as he tried to throw them into the air.

But soon it was all over, and dread came when Augusto announced that it was time to leave. Ludwig helped Feliciano pack his trunk in their rather empty carriage. Their families still seeming immersed in conversation at their front door and didn't seem like they would leave anytime soon. They both couldn't help the chuckle. It seemed like they would miss each other for the next ten years just as Ludwig and Feliciano would.

"I talked to Oppa to see if I could write you letters in our gap years," Ludwig started, for it seemed they still have some time left to talk, some last words they needed before they truly

left.

“Can you?” Feliciano asked, excited for them already.

“N-no,” Ludwig disappointed him, “but, he says they let me send you birthday presents.”

“Birthday presents only?” That would be his only connection to him for ten years?

“Yes, but they let me choose them and my servants are in charge of sending it to you.”

It was enough. It was a little token to always remember Ludwig and to look forward for when their year of arising came, one for every year apart.

“So, what would you like?”

“I though you got to choose them."

“I know, but I would like some ideas. I want them to be something you like and that you can always use,” he admitted, with hands behind him, innocently avoiding his eyes.

Feliciano giggled, but he began thinking, quite hard for him, since he didn’t know what he would exactly want as the years passed. “For my eleventh birthday, I want some pots,” he started.

“Pots?”

“Mhm, I will always use them to cook. When I see you again, I’ll show you all the recipes I learned with them.”

Fair enough, he nodded and remembered it well.

“For my twelfth, paint, lots of paint, with lots of colors, the brightest and pretties you find!” Ludwig nodded.

“For my thirteenth, brushes, made by horse tails, but please, with no harm coming to the horses. And then for my fourteenth a postcard of Berlin, with just your name and mine signed in the back.” Ludwig nodded.

“For my fifteenth, I want perfumes, but not just any. I want something that maybe…makes you think of me.” Ludwig nodded even at how hard it would be. Would he be able to recall Feliciano’s scent to choose one?

“For my sixteenth, I want a necklace, a very nice necklace!” Ludwig nodded.

“For my seventeenth and eigteenth, I want um…fabrics and jewelry.”

“What kind of fabrics and jewelry and for what?”

“Anything you wish, they’re for…my wedding ceremonial suit," he blushed innocently and it spread to Ludwig. He nodded, his blush even making him shake nervously.

“For my nineteenth, I would like flowers."

“Wouldn’t they wilt?”

“They won’t because you’ll make it!”

“What?”

“With your powers! I’ve seen you do it before!”

“But I never really finish them, making flower crystals is really hard.”

“By that time I’m sure you’ll make the prettiest crystal flower ever, and that’s the one you’ll send to me,” he smiled and it gave Ludwig the confidence to be able to try and succeed. He would have the years to practice and learn.

“And for my twentieth,” he silenced thinking of it well.

What would be a good last present? On the year of their arising, when they would meet once again to eventually marry and take the throne.

“A ring,” he finally thought of.

“A ring?”

“Our wedding ring of course.” Feliciano was making him blush too much lately, but he gave that final nod.

“I’ll remember it all well," Ludwig promised, almost willing to bow to truly show that he would get everything he asked.

A glance to their families showed that they were giving each other kisses and shakes, wishing goodbyes and the best of wishes and luck for the years to come. It was their turn. They both took a deep breath and stared to each other, not sure exactly what to do for that real final goodbye.

“We-we a-are getting married right?”

“It’s the reason were even having the gap years,” Feliciano giggled.

“Then…” Ludwig extended his hands and placed them tightly on Feliciano’s shoulder, quite suddenly to the younger boy. “It shouldn’t matter that I…” he leaned close, much closer to Feliciano’s face than he had ever gotten. He could clearly see the surprise in Feliciano’s widened eyes, could take his scent intensely, and saw no movement of Feliciano wanting to stop him. “Kiss you,” he whispered lastly before he closed the distance and settled their lips together.

Their first kiss, unexperienced and new, unaware of what to do or how to react. Should they even deny it? But what a feeling they had both gotten. Like flying, like magic, like the glow

of a new sun approaching on them. Both wanted to hold for more, lost in this new feeling awarded by the softness of each other's lips.

Ludwig departed, for a breath, for a reaction, embarrassment reaching him and making him tremble.

"Um…" he wanted to speak, wanted to apologize, but when he finally met his eyes with Feliciano, Feliciano was in the same state of not being able to speak, of not even moving. He still lay in the feeling that came with it, an explosion of stars in his eyes, a beautiful pink on his cheeks and then, a smile, laughter so enchanting that it got Ludwig to laugh along with him.

"Is it safe to leave now, boys?" Renata came, a gentle hold of her hands on both their shoulders. "Ten years will pass quickly, you'll be back with each other before you know it," she smiled, taking Ludwig into an embrace, which the prince accepted, hugging her back just as tightly. She rubbed a hand through his hair and kissed his forehead sweetly. "You be good."

"I will be, Renata." She confided in his words and stood to join in the carriage with her husband.

Lovino passed by without even a glance, only spearing a wave of his hand before he got in alongside his father. Finally it was Augusto, who even picked up Ludwig and raised him in the air, hugging out all his breath. There was only Feliciano left, who still lay as paralyzed, not even willing to move a single inch, and if it meant staying just here with Ludwig, he wouldn't mind at all. He came close, their eyes still as connected, wanting to preserve their image to remember.

"Ludwig…I…" tears gained, a pain in his expression that could compare to one of a piercing.

Ludwig couldn't take it and began to cry as well, opening his arms so Feliciano could crash into them for one last time. They wept together, in a tight embrace, one they thought they could take refuge in forever.

"Feliciano!" Augusto called gently, not wanting to bring more hurt.

Hesitantly, Feliciano began to move back, pressing another kiss, but this one to Ludwig's cheek.

"I'll miss you, I'll miss you so much, and not a day will pass that I won't be thinking about you."

"I too. I-It's only ten years. We'll meet again and I'll be yearning for that day for the years to come." They began to extend apart, ever so slowly to take every sweet second. "I'll be waiting for you. We'll be together and nothing will truly separate us." Feliciano treasured the words into his heart.

He blew him one last kiss and entered his family's carriage. Ludwig remained still watching as the driver awoke the horses and began moving away. Feliciano poked his head out from

the window and continued to wave, Ludwig raising both his hands to do the same.

“Don’t forget the presents! And don’t forget your promises!” He shouted.

“I won’t! I won’t! I’ll take you everywhere!” Ludwig shouted back, starting to even run behind the carriage.

The rest of the Beilschmidts remained watching, afraid that he would actually run away on foot with the carriage. For Feliciano he was willing to, but he remained loyal and only stayed by the gates of their land, both boys shouting to each other: “Auf Wiedersehen!” and “Arrivederci!”

Their waves continued until they were nothing but dark points in the distance, and silence was once again brought into the house.

“I won’t…I won’t,” Ludwig whispered to himself spotting only but darkness at the end of the road.

Feliciano’s carriage disappeared into the horizon. He was gone.

Feliciano settled back into his seat, the lights of Ludwig’s home only dim from the distance. He raised his hands to rub off the tears from his eyes, and as they fell down his face, they settled on his lips.

He could still feel the lingering. He smiled, for the kiss was indeed endearing, something to cherish and something to add to their prestigious memories. When they met again, despite their wishes to not start anything romantic for their marriage, Feliciano had no problem with receiving, many, many, many more kisses upon his lips by Ludwig.

Renata noticed this new smile, his red cheeks and even pleasant silence. She chuckled and leaned closer to him. “What is all this about?” She teased.

Feliciano laughed nervously and tried to erase whatever expression he just held, trying to calm his red and sitting even straighter in his seat. All the riders laughed and began talking of other things, like the new crops that had grown for the season, anything to keep Feliciano distracted, as well as to make him smile even after having to leave his best friend.

A new part of Feliciano’s life was to begin and he needed the excitement he always made shine.

Ten years, only ten years, he repeated in his mind, unaware of how things could change with such a truly, long...long time.

Chapter End Notes

EDITED: On 23.10.2024

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Wow, I updated in less than a week. Amazing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Feliciano didn’t have to wait for his year of arising to begin his Queen teachings. Now, did he wish to take them or even attend the small little lessons Augusto tried to start with him? No, not at all. He avoided them, preferring to spend the day outside, strolling the woods, helping the servants pick harvest from their fields, sketch at the village or even at the very teachings. Augusto had trunks filled with the doodles he had confiscated throughout the years.

It was hard to get Feliciano's attention focused on learning about laws, politics, and international affairs when all he could think about was the dinner he would help the cooks and his mother prepare for the night. He only truly showed interest in the history of the kingdoms, or when Augusto tried to show him some quaint little magic tricks. He wouldn’t be able to use them until his year of arising, but it was nice to know them and maybe he could advance in some teachings for when he got to the castle.

At one point, Augusto had simply given up. No matter the force he used, Feliciano was just not interested and could truly not get everything. But luckily, Augusto would catch him from time to time reading one of those age old books specifically written to help a prince or princess take the kingship. Not exactly on his Queen duties, but learning things about the King did help. He would sometimes sneak books about Queen affairs, and sometimes Feliciano did take them, only after reading the King ones.

Augusto knew well why it was that he did this. Ludwig of course.

Feliciano in the beginning had missed him dearly, reading anything he could find about all Hearts Kings to remember him or to get a glimpse of how Ludwig would be when they met again. He would stare longingly at the old pictures of the Kings of Ludwig’s lines, of the Beilschmidts. Many of them held the same blonde hair, blue eyes and strong figures that made them fit perfectly to the power of a King. Feliciano found them incredibly handsome, smiling to know that his own husband would be this beautiful. Oh but please, not with those menacing stares and intimidating statures. Ludwig would surely be gentle, kind and fun as he had been in their childhood. But he was given no chance to know.

Rumors or talk of the capital city barely came to his area of Italy, even of the royal family. If travelers did come, their conversations were mostly about how beautiful they found the Italian province, trade, or planning their next venture. Feliciano knew, he had tried overhearing enough. His only way of knowing or having something from Ludwig were the birthday presents he expected every year.

For his eleventh birthday, a morning that he had awaken excitedly to, ignoring his breakfast or his family's birthday singing, to instead head outside and welcome in his birthday gift from Ludwig. The large box that came held the many pots Feliciano had first wished, some large enough for him to fit inside and small ones to make a simple hot chocolate. They were so many that the cooks had to open up a special cabinet just for them.

Throughout the years, Feliciano used them to make an array of things that could fill up a large table and feed hundreds of guests. Their bright red colors hazed, they earned scratches and some even held horrible dents. But they worked, and its damage was all proof of the long use he had given them.

A large crate he was given on his twelfth birthday, filled with jars and jars of rainbows of colors. Augusto commented that many of them were the best paint a King could get. They were such beautiful colors, and many from even outside the kingdom, ones that not even the Valenti could find with their dedication to the arts.

Feliciano could easily count the jars he still had left, for many had disappeared during his various uses. He regretted wasting many of those unique and beautiful colors on random papers and canvases that he probably threw away out of embarrassment.

He had indeed improved, masterpieces to compare to the greatest artistic geniuses the Kingdom had known. All with the help of those very colors he was gifted from the future King of Hearts.

Feliciano would prefer painting as his job before being Queen.

On his thirteenth birthday, he had gotten five brushes, horse hair exactly, with beautiful crafted handles, his name even signed on them, surely a sign that they had been commissioned. Feliciano had smiled upon noticing, knowing that Ludwig must have given it a lot of though.

They still worked as if they were new, only a small one that Feliciano lost when it rolled over to a river he was trying to paint.

On his fourteenth birthday, he got that quaint little postcard, showing Berlin at night, its full large scale light up in splendid colors. What truly made him marvel was the tallness of the castle. Towers and walls rising high and high until it reached a sphered top.

One day, he will live there, together with Ludwig. He turned it around, the signature there, along with his own name, a calligraphy that Ludwig had surely used time well to do and Feliciano could see the effort, tracing his lines as if he could let them whisper again of promises.

For his fifteenth birthday, he received a small little box, a beautiful crafted wooden box wrapped in a red ribbon. Feliciano felt bad to open such a delicacy to the eyes, but the bottles inside were worth it.

They were three pink bottles topped with red jewels. Feliciano had never seen such beautiful bottles, picking them up gently to look at and smell the delightful aroma from inside.

Feliciano couldn't exactly place what it was, but it was sweet, not of candy, but a sweet of flowers and fruits. Was this the scent that made Ludwig think of him? It had been five years already. Could he really recall it? Or did he just pick it at random?

He already though of wearing it that day for his birthday party, but Renata had quickly taken the box and placed it to hide in the basement. Feliciano had complained to her about this decision, but Renata insisted that he should use those perfumes for when he left to Berlin.

By his sixteenth birthday, Feliciano wasn't as excited as he used to be for Ludwig's birthday presents, but he awaited them still and treasured every single one.

That year, he was given a rather peculiar present. It was a necklace, just as he had asked, but it was unlike anything he had ever seen. It was a white cross pendant, tied to a simple black chain. It was odd because he had never seen this symbol before, in colors that were not of Hearts at all. It was simply white and rather plain. The only good thing about it was that it matched well with the outfit he had chosen for his party that day and had gone out quite proud of it. He received so many stares from it, not because of its peculiarity or beauty, but of what it meant, a meaning that no one bothered to explain to Feliciano. His family seemed rather proud that he wore it though, to the point that they gloated to many about it. For what? He didn't stick long enough to find out.

That night, when he was taking everything off, including the pendant necklace he was going to save in a little box of accessories, his mother had come.

"Feliciano, that necklace, you have to always wear it when you're in public, always, no matter the outfit or where you're going, until…" she seemed embarrassed to finish and before Feliciano could ask any more questions, she left through the door and never mentioned the topic again.

He did promise to wear it often, and he did, the accessory as part of him as his special curl. He learned to really like it because of its singularity and rareness, rarely going through his mind that it was gift from his dear childhood friend.

By his seventeenth birthday, it was getting even harder and harder to recall Ludwig. He was failing his promise of thinking about him every single day, other things in his mind like his paintings and drawings, the harvest he was supposed to pick, spending time with friends in the village, his Queen teachings and the occasional boy or girl that he crushed on. Not that Ludwig ever stopped being someone of great importance to him. He was still to marry him and only three years were left for his year of arising. But when he though to Ludwig, he only saw him as a childhood friend, one which he shared fantasies that would only remain as so. But there were times when he wished he didn't, and would go hunting around the house or fields for proof of their time together, to recollect and loose himself in the memory of such golden days. He had to constantly head to the gallery hall where they held his portrait to try and remember his face, doubting if he ever looked like that. He would look at the old drawings they made, and stain them with tears. All the weight of time falling on him and making him miss dearly their joy, their peace and simpler times when all they had was each other and the whole world seemed to already belong to them, even if they weren't King and Queen yet.

How he wanted that back, how he wanted to be back with Ludwig, how he wanted to take the world again and be back in their throne. But the next day, he was back to normal, and he continued with whatever his soul felt like doing for this new shinning sun.

Three years, he would say to himself, only three years left.

His gift that year, another crate with an array of different fabrics with different designs and colors, was thrown in the basement along with the perfumes. It was no point to use them when their wedding day was still years away.

For his eighteenth birthday, he received another crate of extravagant jewels that went along with the boxes of fabrics and perfume into the basement.

In the very same year, the house lost the presence of his older brother, who had married the servant boy, Antonio Fernandez, in a very beautiful feast. It made him remember how much Ludwig and him used to tease them about getting married someday. He had cried along with his mother during the ceremony and especially when they had to say goodbye. Antonio had found a job of wealth to sustain them and Lovino found a place to open up the restaurant he always wanted. Sadly it was all far away in Antonio's native province of Iberia.

Despite how angry Lovino tended to get, his rather harsh words and strong personality, he was still a brother Feliciano enjoyed spending his time and had shared so much with. Having him leave brought emptiness, and he wallowed in it for quite a while.

On the morning of his nineteenth birthday, one his family couldn't be present as they were dealing with getting some things for his birthday feast in the village this time, they left him a note, his birthday morning treat and a small gift box beside it, the note saying that it was Ludwig's present.

It was a rather simple box, golden, tied with a red ribbon, probably the same kind they had used for other wrapping of his past birthday presents. As he held it, he tried recalling what it was that he had asked as a child, remembering then the flower. Ah yes, a crystal flower, one that Ludwig should have made himself. In this box, was held the proof of Ludwig's growing power, of his learning, practice, and if he really did master enough as Feliciano knew he would have by this time.

He unwrapped it, moved the lid aside and had to take a rather loud breath, even dropping the lid to the floor as he stared.

It wasn't just a single flower, Ludwig had made for him an entire bouquet of flowers. It was as small as the box, but each flower was a different one and when Feliciano took a quick inspection, he could tell that each one was made uniquely. They were rather loose though, and he could easily remove each flower, like…it was an actual flower instead of a crystal. When he moved away a single daisy, it shone red and began to grow in his hand until it turned into the regular size of any daisy, the colors becoming alive and for a moment Feliciano could think it was real if it wasn't for the hard feel of crystal or the extra shine it had to it. He did the same with a lily, and the same magic happened.

He was astounded, eyes widened with joyful tear at their edges. He didn't expect such a beautiful present, with such meaning, dedication and even love. Ludwig must be by now a master of his power, nothing like the clumsy magic he couldn't outshine or would only hurt him. He was already so proud of him and couldn't wait to see what more he could do.

Only one more year, he told himself, only one more year.

As his next birthday drew closer, preparations began immediately. Not only for his last birthday party in the Valenti villa, but his departure to Berlin. His room was beginning to be emptied, all packed into trunks and bags to send along with him on his move. Augusto had begun his teachings once again, and was more forceful on Feliciano to listen and to take notes. No matter, Feliciano managed to space anyway and never truly learned. Ten years and in some aspects he never changed.

"I have everything, Signore Renzo," Feliciano said, all the bread he needed in the little bag he was given by the servants. Some were sticking out too much and were in danger of falling or ripping apart.

"Are you sure? I could give you another bag."

"Oh no, it's all right, I'll make sure nothing happens to these."

"I hope so, try to look at where you're going this time," the baker warned with a laugh.

"I'll try," Feliciano laughed as well as he made his way through the streets onward home.

It was the early morning and the village was just beginning to wake up, one by one the street filling with presence. By the time Feliciano had reached the center, he saw a group of children playing with the water of the fountain.

"It's Feliciano!" A little girl called.

"Feli! Feli! Feli!" The rest of the children saw and ran over to him, huddled over for his attention.

"Ciao, ciao, ciao ragazzi," Feliciano wanted to greet them all, and he did, rubbing their little hairs, a shake here and there, some hugs and some kisses.

Another little girl, probably the youngest in the group, who looked to be around three years old, smiled the most beautifully and was there to give Feliciano some flowers she had surely picked from her garden.

"Ah, Sofia, these are beautiful," he complimented, kneeling to her and taking them to already decorate his hair.

She began jumping and clapping, loving how they looked on him, reds and yellows to go along with the wave and curls of his bronze hair.

"You look spectacular," one boy complimented.

“Davvero?” He chuckled, and the rest of the children nodded along with the young boy, agreeing that Feliciano looked like a true Queen.

“I’ll treasure them for as long as they keep themselves there. Grazie, Sofia carina,” he kissed her little hands, and she smiled and blushed in an adorable expression. Feliciano just had to hug her. “Now, would you mind accompanying me to the village outskirts, I wouldn’t mind some company getting home." And the kids couldn’t deny, already leading him forward as if Feliciano was a newcomer to the village.

They talked of their mornings, of their breakfasts and the duties their parents had sent them out that morning to do. As the village kept waking, many opened their windows, taking a peek of the Kingdom’s future Queen. To think that the little boy that many of them had seen run these very streets with the young prince Ludwig was now grown, to turn twenty in only three days.

He had grown handsomely, a true beauty of the village that many admired, gawked at or even dreamed about. He was still recognizable because he possessed a childish youth that sometimes mended him well with the children he was being accompanied with.

His beauty was not only outward, but he had the kindest soul in the village. He greeted and tried to befriend everyone, played with the children, flirted with the young men, sang and chatted feverishly with the young women, helped the elders with everything he could, and overall was just a friendly person that anyone could approach and speak to.

Everyone had feared with his noble status as a Valenti and his future tittle of Queen of Hearts that he would grow to be a selfish and pretentious stuck up like any other aristocrat in the Kingdom. But they were proven wrong, for Feliciano was a man of his people, who found his time to be with them or head out from the life of his posh villa to run in the woods, work in the fields or spend his time with even the lowliest of peasants. If the Berlin castle could see him right now, with a simple blouse white shirt, worn tight pants and long black boots, you would think he was another boy from the village and not a figure chosen by the very gods to rule over all the provinces of the Hearts Kingdom.

“Mamma says you’re leaving in a couple of days, right after your birthday,” one child told Feliciano.

“I am, in four days to be exact."

“To Berlin?”

“Mhm, I start my teachings and preparations to become Queen."

“They call that year, the year of arising, right?” One child asked, for he was just taught about it at his school.

“Indeed, a year only for the practice, and by the end of it, the three future rulers are crowned and the King and Queen are wedded.”

All the children began to giggle, for a reason that Feliciano didn't understand, looking curiously to all of them. "What's the matter?"

"You're getting married!" One child teased and cooed, the rest of the children going along with it, which in turn got Feliciano to flush and want to run ahead of them.

"I-I am," he admitted.

"But he's not getting married to just anyone! He's marrying the prince of Hearts, and when he gets crowned, he'll be the King of Hearts," one child defended for Feliciano.

"I want to marry a prince," one girl dreamed.

"My sister wanted to marry Feliciano," one child admitted, which got Feliciano to laugh. Surely she must have been joking, but he knew that the case had happened a lot.

Being close to the wedding age, plus being as handsome as he was and with a family of riches, many had dared seek his hand in marriage, only to be denied heavily by Augusto. Why would Augusto want to annul an engagement set by the Aces to the Prince of Hearts for some peasant boy or girl from the village? Feliciano though it rude how he denied others, and had talked himself to his grandfather about it. He would move his grandson aside and simply say that it was just as things were decided, and it had made him think about his own engagement to Ludwig.

Yes, Ludwig had been a dear friend, but a dear friend he hadn't seen in years. The meeting they will have once again in a couple of days sometimes felt like he would be meeting a new person.

What if he really changed to the point of being unrecognizable? What if he had grown rude and selfish? Would he still have to go along with the wedding just because it was decided as so?

No, Ludwig would not be like that.

Ludwig had been kind, he was loyal, he was loving, especially after all their promises and the gifts he had given him the past years. This decision was made good, accepted by the Aces. He had nothing to worry about.

"Well, my papa was in Berlin many months ago, and he told me he managed to see the prince himself," one boy gloated, and many of the children gasped in amazement, heading close to him to hear more. Even Feliciano's interest was taken, wanting a hint of how Ludwig was now, the closest he has gotten in ten years.

"How was he?"

"Papa didn't get to really meet him, just see him from afar. Papa says that he used to see him as a kid here when he visited Feliciano, and when he saw him there, he said he barely recognized him, that he's changed a lot and looks even more like his grandfather, King Aldrich."

Many though it cool, many wondered and talked on, but Feliciano remained pensive, with hurt and even more worry.

These were the very things that he had been worrying about as the days for his arising began to come closer.

He grew nervous, hugging the bag of bread against his chest as a way of calming, but it didn't work enough.

"Feliciano, were here."

He looked up and noticed the bridge that divided the village from the roads into the fields, where further ahead would be his home.

"Oh…oh! We are! I have to get going!" He prepared the bag well on his shoulder, making his way over the bridge. "Ciao, Ciao!" He waved to them and they all waved in unison with their own goodbyes, hoping to see him more in the village before he truly left.

As he ran the rest of the way, his thoughts repeated what the boy had said about Ludwig.

"He barely recognized him, that he's changed a lot and looks even more like his grandfather, King Aldrich."

Maybe he was just confused, maybe he had seen another person. Ludwig will still be the same, they will be happy to see each other, fulfill their promises of travel and things would be as they once were.

Chapter End Notes

EDITED ON: 23.10.2024

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

> I'm announcing from now that on July 2 I'll be leaving for the Eurotrip of my dreams. Although yes, very touristic and fun and educational, there's also other things I have to do that I'm not going to get much into, but it means that even if I do have my computer and internet, I basically won't have any time at all to work on fanfiction. I will be posting a lot about the trip on my personal tumblr blog though, so you can go over there and check it out if you want. So for the entirety of July and beginning of August, I'll be on a hiatus. Although right now it's still rather early in June, for the next weeks I'll be busy with preparation so might not have that much time to write to post and announce. I might squeeze two extra chapters before leaving but let's see. But now, I hope you enjoy this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Both Feliciano's birthday feast and his departing were only a matter of three and four days away from them, but Renata felt like both were to occur that very night.

The house was a mess with preparations, having to go through and fro as she helped choose the appetizers and cake toppings, as well as moving boxes from room to room and asking Feliciano if he was sure he didn't want to bring that nice belt to Berlin. She was meaning to ask him again, hoping he had changed his mind and was currently searching for him.

"Nicola!" She called to a servant who was wiping some glass figures near the main stairs. "Any idea where Feliciano is? He's not in his rooms or around the house."

"I believe he was sent by the cooks to get some bread."

"He went out...to get bread," she groaned, "he's supposed to be here helping."

Lucky for her, the doors swung open and in Feliciano came, all bread safe in his bag, despite the dirt, sweat and even flowers covering him.

"There you are!" She went forward to him.

"Buon giorno, mamma!"

They kissed as a greet and then Feliciano twirled her around in an energetic embrace. Nicola thought they were ready to dance right before him.

"Buon giorno, carino mio, I'm glad you're finally here, there's so much-" she noticed the flowers in his hair and began picking on them. They were beautiful, she admitted. "Why do you-"

“Sofia gave them to me,” was his simple excuse.

“Feliciano! Do you have them?” A cook came forward.

“Right here,” he handed it over proudly.

The cook inspected them and saw that all were appropriate. She smiled and thanked him, turning to leave. Feliciano was tempted to join them to prepare whatever it was that they were planning, but he was held in place as Renata took his shirt to look at the dirty patches.

“I think it’s time to throw away this shirt, Feliciano."

“Oh Mamma, this shirt is not torn and it fits me very well.”

“It’s still rather messy for someone like you to go out in."

“I was just out in the village getting bread."

She turned him and sighed in relief when she saw he wore the white cross pendant proudly over him.

“I’ll wash it and it would be good enough even for Berlin."

“You’re bringing this to Berlin?”

“Why wouldn’t I? I like it.”

“Feliciano, you can’t expect a Queen to parade across the streets of Berlin in dirt and with flowers in their hair."

“I think it’s pretty appropriate for a queen,” he accommodated the flowers.

“I think it’s childish,” Augusto commented, heading down the stairs with books, pads and pencils in his arms. “You listen to your mother and get rid of that shirt immediately. I will not let you embarrass yourself in Berlin."

“I don’t think it’s embarrassing,” he whispered to himself.

His mother and grandfather decided to ignore him, Augusto handing him the pile of items.

“Now, go on and help her with what’s left to pack in the study and then I want you writing notes on chapter seven of ‘Sea and Port Trade’.”

Feliciano groaned, but nodded in approval, already making his way towards the stairs, followed by his mother.

“About that belt-”

“Mamma, no.”

“Tanti auguri a te!” They all finished singing and Feliciano blew the single large candle on the top of his cake.

They all applauded and Feliciano thanked them for singing so wonderfully. The cake was cut and he was given the first slice. Wanting to already indulge from it, he picked up two cups of wine from the many the servants kept moving around in trays and made his way back to the table that he was sharing with his brother and his husband.

“Are you sure you don’t want cake?” Feliciano asked him, not being able to hold himself and already eating some sliced fruit the cake included. He kept one glass and gave the other to Lovino, who took and already had a sip from it.

“I’ve had enough for today."

“Maybe those brownies weren’t a good idea."

“Shut your mouth, Antonio. It was definitely worth it. You never deny Signora Melania’s brownies.”

“I had five,” Feliciano easily admitted, which earned a laugh from Antonio.

“Always quite the appetite, Feliciano,” he rubbed his hair just as he used to when he was a kid, and Feliciano smiled, glowed and laugh just like he did.

Antonio was so glad he had barely changed in the last ten years.

“You be careful what you eat in Berlin though,” Lovino warned.

“It’s not like they’re going to poison me."

“It wouldn’t surprise me if they did.”

Antonio glared at him, but Lovino was too distracted with his wine to pay attention to it.

“Ignore him, I’m sure they would be glad to welcome you, and Ludwig will feel ecstatic.”

It made Feliciano smile confidently, who had lately grown extremely nervous about this reunion, about leaving home, beginning his true Queen teachings, getting his power- he had to shake it all off before it impeded him from enjoying the last night he had with his family.

“Speaking of Ludwig, what did he sent as a gift?”

Feliciano sighed disappointedly, and not even the taste of the cake was enough to cheer him up at the mention. “It didn’t arrive today.”

“That’s weird, they usually arrive first thing in the morning,” Lovino commented now that his wine was gone.

“Maybe he wants to give it to you in person,” Antonio suggested.

“What was he supposed to give you?” Lovino asked.

“Um…” Feliciano blushed, “he was supposed to give me…our wedding ring.”

Antonio and Lovino remained silent, looking then to each other with some silent understanding, smirking before then facing Feliciano.

“That’s adorable,” Lovino replied sarcastically.

He never held a liking to Ludwig, one that continued to this day even with their years apart. Feliciano though that maybe his disliking started back when Ludwig used to tease him a lot about Antonio or the many pranks they used to pull on him. But they were just kids and now him and Antonio were actually married. So what could he possibly hate him for now? He was about to ask that moment, but instead, Lovino placed a pretty little red box tied with a yellow sash in front of him on the table.

“Never mind his gift, I at least brought you something and surely better than some fancy ring,” Lovino gloated proudly, keeping a watchful eye on Feliciano. Surely he wanted him to open it immediately.

A pleasant smile came back to Feliciano’s lips, one that made Lovino smile himself. He untied the yellow sash slowly and then ripped the red wrapper to reveal a golden box. He opened it and inside was a little golden and red chest. Feliciano gasped, it was beautiful, small and fragile looking despite its excessive arches and designs like an alter. He picked it up, easily fitting on the palm of his hand. Surely it was meant to place small necklaces and bracelets…and earrings (He had pierced his ears the year before).

“Open it,” Lovino told him, insisting, a wonder in his eyes as well as Antonio to see what kind of reaction Feliciano would have.

Hesitantly he raised the lid open, where a mirror welcomed him. What astounded him were the gears that rose from the space under it and turned, playing a very, very familiar song.

“I’ll journey and see beyond the lines of our kingdom,
Never a fear to be lost, never a fear to fall,
In pleasure, I will take the mysteries of what I could meet,
If you accept to be mine, my Queen.”

Feliciano began to sing with it, a big appreciative smile as he then silenced and let the melody continue on its own. Antonio wished he had continued singing, lost in the sweetness and loyalty of his voice, one surely that reminded him of the promises he held for his future King.

“I love it, I love it so much Lovino." Tears gathered in his eyes and he stood to truly show his emotion by embracing him into a hold that he refused to depart.

“All right, all right, now get off." He patted him on the head, and even at his harsh words, Feliciano didn’t dare move, keeping a tight hold that wouldn’t let Lovino pry him off.

“Feliciano!” He shouted.

Nope, Feliciano was not leaving his side anytime soon. Antonio laughed, much to Lovino’s annoyance.

“Okay, okay, I get it, you like the present and your appreciative about it, but get off before I decide to smash this glass against your head.”

Feliciano giggled as he moved away, not even the threat enough to die down his excitement over the present. When he sat back down, he held it dearly in his hands, not being able to take his eyes off from it.

“Lovino and I had it made,” Antonio told.

“A month’s work from the restaurant for that. You better take care of it! Or else!” He warned.

“Don’t worry, Lovino. I’ll make sure to take good care of it. I will have it in a special place in the castle when I arrive.”

Lovino smiled proudly, but now, he wanted another glass of wine. Damn, the drink they had chosen for the party was good. Luckily he saw his mother approaching with a tray, enough for all of them. Behind her, his grandfather and father.

“Miei bambini,” she cooed as she took them both into her arms after placing the tray on the table. She kissed both their hair and forehead, hugging them to her chest. Both the boys didn’t mind, they loved their mother dearly and still begged for her embraces no matter their age. She had a warmness to her, a welcoming and a softness that Feliciano was going to miss having often and Lovino already did.

She took her seat between them, Augusto and Vincenzo joining along, as happy to be part of whatever conversation they were having. Feliciano eagerly showed them all Lovino’s present, they enjoyed from the wine and talked together as if they were in any past family dinner instead of a party surrounded by many other guests.

Feliciano was going to miss this, all this family love, of trust, of compassion and secureness to be close and looked after.

“You will visit, right?” Feliciano suddenly interrupted a conversation about some inventions going on in Spades.

They all halted into silence, remembering why it was that they came together to this table, remembering exactly where Feliciano was leaving tomorrow.

“As often as we are allowed,” Renata made sure.

Feliciano smiled, but it wasn’t enough to let him hide the evident concern in his features.

“Feliciano, are you nervous?” Vincenzo asked.

He didn’t want to make his family worry, but he couldn’t continue to remain silent about this either. He knew they were there to help and he knew they can offer any advice to tame his arrayed emotions.

“Berlin is very far away from here,” he reminded, a distance that will take him days to travel in carriage. “It’s in a whole new province I’ve never been to, completely different from mine, with strange people I’ve never met."

“That’s not true,” Vicenzo interrupted.

“You’ll have Ludwig, and I’m sure the rest of the Beilschmidts will help you in settling in,” Renata consoled, placing a comforting hand on Feliciano’s shoulders.

Feliciano remained weirdly silent. He had never reacted like this to the prospect of his best friend.

“They haven’t seen or heard from me in ten years, what if…their feelings changed? What if they’re not as eager to see me? What if-”

“I though your last birthday gifts had proven to you enough that it is not the case,” Augusto interrupted. "You are the arising Queen of this kingdom, chosen and to be wedded to the heir of the Beilschmidts. They are expectant to have you and have waited for these days as eagerly as you have. They’ll treat you as you deserve, I assure you that.”

Feliciano took a calming breath, relaxing into his chair and trying to convince himself of this sureness just as his grandfather did.

It wasn’t enough.

He was about ready to deny more, the worry taking over his mind, one that they could tell would not dare yet leave. Renata had to tighten her hold, a hand going to caress his hair, moving one long curled bang behind his hear, so his bright brown eyes could have a clearer look to her. She wanted him to see how she believed in him, how she hoped and knew he would be strong enough to deal with what he was to meet with the palace in a couple of days.

“I’m scared to be Queen, Mamma,” Feliciano whispered to her, admitting the biggest of his fears, the job that seemed the most intimidating and he never though he could be capable of, even with his grandfather’s small teachings.

“And I’m sure all Queens felt just as you did days before their arising."

“But I haven’t learned enough to rule an entire kingdom. I don’t know if I was right for this."

“The Aces chose you, Feliciano,” Renata made clear. "They chose you because they though you capable.”

“How can they know that?”

She smiled at him, taking both his hands reassuringly in hers.

“Because they would know as I about your kindness, your understanding, your energy, what you do to help the people around you, the love that you share for everyone and everything, and a happiness that shines no matter the circumstances. I believe that they’re all something the Kingdom would benefit from having,” she assured him, tracing a finger over the smile that began to form on his lips. “Ruling is not always war and laws, but mostly what you do for your people and kingdom, and I’m sure you have enough to give them. Besides, you’ll have Ludwig with you. I’m sure he’s just as nervous as you are, as excited to meet you again and willing to do everything with you as it had been once. Depend on that union, Feliciano. Together, you both can make great things.”

And Feliciano smiled true, just the boost of confidence in him that they could depart him off with.

She began sharing the drinks around them, until all held a glass, each raising it up to the air to join in the toast circle.

“This is for our Feliciano. We’ve waited long enough for this and tomorrow he embarks on that new stage of his life that would bring a new chapter in the history of the Hearts Kingdom. Gentlemen, the capital city will never meet a threat like him once again." They all laughed.

“For Glory!” Augusto alled.

“For Honor! For Riches!” Antonio and Lovino shouted.

“For the gods!” Vicenzo and Renata raised.

“For Hearts!” Feliciano shouted and all their glasses met in a loud clank of promise, some wine spilling and hopefully staining them with luck for their arising ruler.

Feliciano’s room had been left emptied, everything he was to take in trunks outside waiting for their carriage. Everything else that was not, was brought to the basements or set in other rooms in which they would be put to better use. Renata made sure that his clothes for the day would be as refined as everything else they had gotten new for him, especially the ones he would use for the other days of his trip and first days in the castle. Feliciano admitted that it was a nice red coat, a nice white blouse shirt underneath, his white cross necklace and fitting black boots.

In secrecy, he had packed a case with the clothing he used right here in his home, finding them much more comfortable than the intricate things that only felt suffocating and excessively pompous. He made sure it would be the first pack he mounted before his family inspected it as they had done with the rest of his things.

“Are you sure all this shit is going to fit in the carriage?” Lovino said as he headed outside, looking at the mess of trunks and boxes that filled almost all the front entrance.

“They’re sending a carriage from the palace, I’m sure it would be big enough,” Renata assured her eldest son, bringing with her a small box she had cleaned free off dust before bringing it forward to Feliciano. Feliciano easily recognized it, smiling and taking it in his hands.

“Wear it for when you arrive at the castle.”

Feliciano nodded, tempted to open the box of perfumes and spray himself completely just for the trip. But his mother wanted his scent to be fresh, especially for the castle, surely to impress Ludwig.

The sound of hooves suddenly filled the air, all eyes rising knowingly of the specific carriage that was arriving.

It was as large as Renata expected, a little too much for the single rider and its driver. Red as usual, with large symbols of Hearts in all different shades of red possible, with some bronze and gold thrown into it. It was in itself a work of art, of image and craft to show off the important presence of the one that would be inside.

The Valenti, as well as the servants that had come out to help with the packing were left in awe, not sure how they could deal with such majesty and great reminder of the royalty member they were to offer. Feliciano had never seen such a beautiful carriage, more so than even the ones he had remembered Ludwig and his family brought when they visited. It wasn’t until the driver came down from his seat and bowed down to all of them and open the compartment in the back did they all begin moving, awaken from the fantasy the carriage had brought to all their minds.

Feliciano first packed the one he held close, with many old things like his preferred clothing, art supplies, favorite books and some of Ludwig’s past birthday presents. Once he made sure it was set in the carriage, he stood aside while the servants did their work. He wanted to say goodbye to all of them, but they seemed too busy to do so. Instead he went over to his family, all taking their turn to embrace him and wish him the best of luck. The most hurtful was the one he had to wish to his mother, who held the tightest and caressed his hair and face, just as she had done when he was just a baby. That boy was no baby anymore, but now a young man who stood just as tall as her. She cried, and he joined her as well, all packing done, the compartment closed and yet both mother and son refused to depart from this last embrace.

“Please come to the castle, as often as you can, and I’ll visit myself. I don’t think I can ever truly leave Italy,” he promised and hoped.

“I will, and I will expect you to come find time to see me, along with Ludwig. I want to see if he really grew up to be a nice gentleman.”

The same hopes Feliciano held. He nodded in promise, keeping a tight hold on her hands.

The driver blew a whistle, a sign that it was time to leave. Feliciano began departing, a smile of perseverance for once ready to head off.

“Vi amo tutti! You will always be in my thoughts. Please write!” Reluctantly he had to let go from his mother, dashing off with countless waves as he mounted the carriage and made himself comfortable. It was already rather lonely, despite how decorative it was, with red curtains and comfortable mattresses underneath him. He sat up to the window, wishing many good byes and continuing his waving for as long as he could see his family, all until they were covered well by the trees and hedges that surrounded his home.

It wouldn’t be his home anymore.

He sat forward and though about taking a nap, but then remembered the postcard Ludwig had long ago sent, taking it from one of his books, slightly weathered with the age of the last few years, but the night view of the city still clear. He turned it around, the names still bright, still calling for him to come.

He was answering, he was going, onward to his new home, at the palace in Berlin as the arising Queen and with his husband to be.

Chapter End Notes

EDITED: On 24.10.2024

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It had taken five days of travel.

Feliciano traveled through much of the northern part of Italy, being able to pass and see cities like Florence, Milan and Turin. He tried convincing the driver to stop and see them up close, but every time he refused, saying that he had a tight schedule and the Hearts royals expected him in exactly five days. Any change could cause them to send help and he might even lose his job.

They were as precise as usual and it made Feliciano roll his eyes as he had to depart by Florence without even a chance to buy a little trinket.

He spent his time mostly sketching the many beautiful terrains he saw, enough to fill half an entire book he had gotten new on his last birthday. Hearts was indeed beautiful, and he wished he could have stopped and explored more, to fill this book he had to completion.

He also napped, ate from the food prepared for him or the driver stopped for. The driver rarely spoke to him, and it was mostly Feliciano who had to start the conversation to not let himself be driven mad by the constant silence inside the carriage. In the process, he found out that the driver actually resided in the castle and was the main driver for the royal family, along with two others that were mostly for errands and small events in the very city. He had a wife and two young children who also lived in the castle, in one of the lower rooms he made clear, which meant that neither he nor his family saw the royals as often. He never did mention Ludwig, and Feliciano had to ask himself to get something. The driver admitted that there really wasn't much he could say, he was only his driver and the Prince never really spoke to him unless it was with commands for new directions.

Feliciano would just have to give up and see for himself once he got there.

They arrived in territory of a new Province, of the German province more precisely, and in here indeed did Feliciano laid wondered. He did not find any time to nap, impressed by everything new, like the mountains that reached so high that snow covered their tops and the new specimens of flowers he had never seen in person before. He wanted to stop, take more of this fresh new air, pick flowers and keep some for the memory of the trip, but they kept on going by the driver's insistence.

He saw villages, towns and far off cities of new style, decorating many scenes beautifully and bringing them alight, overhearing mostly German now which even intimidated him slightly.

By his final night, he had made his goal of filling his entire sketchbook, now lying open as he slept upon that last drawing he was making of a large pass between two darkly tall mountains.

Ever since they came into the Germanic province, Feliciano had been very awake, even in the nights where he talked frivolously about everything that was just usual for the driver. He insisted many times that Feliciano should rest, but he only took his word on this last night of travel, the tiredness from the past nights taking a toll on him. The driver admitted that it was all rather endearing. Feliciano was a very sweet and joyful boy, the first to ever speak to him and actually let him talk about himself and his family. He was quite excited to serve him.

The next morning, that of his arrival, Feliciano still lay in the same position he had gone to sleep in, but only changed when he tried to take sunlight from the new rays that were coming from the small window.

“Feliciano! Feliciano!” The driver called.

By the movement, Feliciano could tell that they were still moving onward, the rocking motion not helping at all to wake up. If anything it only made him want to continue resting.

“Un po píu, mamma,” he groaned, cuddling more into the seat.

“Feliciano! We’ve arrived to Berlin!” The driver called slightly louder this time.

Feliciano realized that didn’t sound at all like his mother, he recognized it as the driver, then realized he was still in the carriage, overhearing a lot of voices, other carriages, as well as a mixture of noises he had never heard before, all happening at once to create a new sort of melody.

Berlin…Berlin…Berlin…he sat right up. He was finally in Berlin!

He threw himself to the window as if to fall right off, wanting to take his first glimpse of the city.

He did not expect what he saw at all.

Yes, he had a postcard, had seen some pictures, and Ludwig had told him as children that Berlin was large and extensive, far beyond what Feliciano could understand since he came from Italy, a province that didn’t see cities as big as this magnitude.

It covered well the entirety of a large valley, it’s ends so far that it was hard for Feliciano to spot. From the heights they were currently in as they made their way down a hill, Feliciano had a great chance to see the many different types of buildings and structures that stood together high, small, as big to cover great spaces or even elder areas that maintained a much simpler village look. Many of the larger buildings, surely universities, schools, specialized departments, churches, and libraries were a Romanesque and Gothic styles that he knew was very singular to the Germanic province. Much of the smaller buildings, surely of apartments, cafes and homes shared some of those very traits to them that made it all connect together as a picture. As expected, red was the color that stood out the most, along with bronze and much littler colors that only Feliciano’s painter eyes could truly see.

Two rivers cut and moved around the city, large enough to even hold boats, with bridges to make it easier for carriages or other modes of transportation to pass. Between the modern

structures, streets, lamplights and squares filled with crowded people admiring a statue or display, Feliciano also spotted beautiful parks and gardens. As he came closer and closer, he noticed the amount of people that strode, that commuted on their daily routine and spoke to their many neighbors or enjoyed conversation with friends. He had never seen so many people in one place, and although many ftom Hearts, from countless of different provinces, he also found through the crowds people from even different kingdoms. He came across inventions he had never seen in Italy, like carriages driven by themselves without the help of horses as his was and large trains that moved through the city for better transportation, and from what Feliciano could tell, powered by magic from the driver. And there was just so much, all too much to grasp into detail, more so than he could imagine or sketch simply in just one page of his book.

And then there was the building that stood the highest above everything else, the true jewel and beauty of the city- and oh Aces! He was actually going to live there.

The castle stood right at the very center of the entire city, a structure so tall and large that it could be evident no matter in what spot of the city you stood in. Towers, large and small, stacked and stacked from a thickness at the bottom, growing thinner and thinner to the top until it reached the famed sphere. With its largeness, Feliciano doubted that he would find his room or even make his way through it normally. Ludwig had told him once that he still had a hard time just finding his brother's room, and this was coming from somebody who was even born and raised there. Feliciano though that maybe with the passing years he would be more precise and would actually serve of great help getting the new arising Queen around.

Feliciano couldn't just sit back in his chair as he watched on. He had his entire upper body hanging from the window as he watched everything. He was too distracted by the new beauty that he didn't notice himself the many eyes that were glued on him. Two particular children, who were riding the carriage that was moving alongside his, were the heavy ones he felt that actually made him look to them. Feliciano, as friendly as ever, waved to them with a charming smile, which in turn got the kids to scream.

"Mutti! Mutti! Die Königin winkte uns! Die Königin winkte uns!" They shouted to their mother, who looked up and met with the very Queen, with the same awe in the children's eyes.

This time Feliciano waved sheepishly and slowly sat back into his hidden position in the carriage. But it had already been too late, it had caught the attention of many, who recognized the carriage and began pointing to it ecstatically. Many stood, and not just people, but all kinds of carriages alike. Whispers went on with the presence of the new arising Queen, riding down the streets of the city in the royal carriage. As it advanced, people followed behind it, either walking or even other carriages joining it on its journey. It was just too many to wave at once, not at all like the crowds he had met in Rome or in his very village. The driver knew well to ignore all this commotion around him and only continued the route as he was told, the castle coming closer and closer, giving Feliciano the chances to witness more details he hadn't appreciated from his far away distance.

The roads changed to those of clean stone, surrounded mostly by gardens that decorated the entrance to the castle well. He was so close, the grand gates now before him, where an

enormous crowd was already awaiting him. It only intensified the beating of his heart, his nervousness, causing him to even shake. He kept a tight hold of his own hands, trying to calm himself, trying to remember to even breathe. He was alone now, and didn't have his mother, brother or grandfather to calm him down and ease him with believing words.

The chants became louder, the screams filled with welcome, praises and eagerness to catch a glimpse of their new coming Queen. The gates were opened and at least a pathway was set for the carriage to pass. People still stood and celebrated too close to the carriage, which made Feliciano wonder how he was going to pass this large and extended crowd. They filled the clear surrounding entrance of the castle, which was usually empty and only filled with pasture and flowers. It was good ground for just any who lived in the castle to walk on and enjoy from the day…just if that day wasn't the one the arising Queen was arriving for the first time.

The carriage spun and rode all until it stopped at the very entrance, a large open area that extended in marble, filled with pillars, banks, beautifully sculpted statues and flowers to decorate, guarded heavily by many guards so people wouldn't enter and Feliciano's entrance would be much more comfortable. Far behind were the gates of the inner castle and around it were surely many entrances for guards or servants to take. Only one figure stood to greet him, while behind him was a large line of servants, dressed in the same uniform, bowing precise and instantly in welcome to the new Queen.

"Kiku?"

It took Feliciano slightly to recognize, but when he did, without thinking of the proper way to head down from the carriage and make his first standing in castle and Berlin ground, he slammed the door open and rushed towards him, ignoring the louder shouts of the crowd surrounding them. He instantly took Kiku into a tight hug, laughing and twirling him around in the area, much to the surprise of the servants and even many of the people in the crowd who saw.

"Miei Dei! Miei Dei! Kiku, it's you! It's you!" Feliciano shouted with the outmost glee, to the point of almost breaking down to cry.

Kiku was stunned, with widened eyes trying to maintain as still as possible, like many others, not expecting the Queen to take him into such a tight and loving embrace after only having one single meeting thirteen years ago.

"Yes, it is me, your highness."

"Oh please, don't start with that, Kiku!" Feliciano already scolded, with that adoring smile that Kiku still remembered clearly.

The servants quickly headed to the carriage and began taking the bagagge, the driver helping along as well.

"It's been so long, and our first meeting wasn't exactly…the best one." Kiku to this day felt a big fault because of it. "I'm rather surprised you would…greet me like this." He felt like it

wasn't deserving of him, and it hurt Feliciano to see that doubt in his eyes. He went forward for another embrace, no matter how Kiku reacted to it.

"You are going to be my Jack. You'll be as important to me as Ludwig. I want to show and give you a friendship deserving as such."

And for the first time in a while, Kiku felt welcomed and relaxed in a hug, smiling and having to still hold himself from cuddling or even wrapping his arms around him to tighten their hold. It felt rather hurtful to have to let go, but there were other matters to attend to immediately now that Feliciano was here.

"Now, come, many others want to see you and are waiting inside the castle."

"Shouldn't I help get everything down?"

"The servants will be dealing with it and they'll be leaving everything in what's to be your room."

Without any more distractions, Kiku lead Feliciano forward into the castle, a large door opening for them that lead through a richly decorated entrance, all kinds of banners hanging from the ceiling and paintings upon paintings of other past monarchs. Feliciano felt rather meek under all of this, but still impressed, having to turn and stop many times to look at everything even as Kiku continued forward. He must have been longer in the castle to easily ignore all this fabulous wealth and even art.

"It really is so nice to see you again and I'm excited for the time were going to spend together, but-"

"You were expecting to meet with Ludwig." Kiku knew, it was actually rather traditional for the arising King to be the first to meet with his arising Queen.

"Well…" he hated to be so rash with this, but it had been ten years and he was indeed eager to meet with Ludwig again. It was one his biggest worries and excitements. "Where is he?" he asked.

"Right now, he's with his father in the outer woods dealing with some of his training. They'll be joining us at dinner tonight as a celebration."

"Shouldn't there be a ball?" Feliciano had read enough to know that usually a very important ball was held, in the very one in which the three monarchs' power was activated and were given the official approval of the King to start the arising.

"You've done your reading," Kiku told him proudly. "Yes, there should be, but seeing as we had already met beforehand and Ludwig's earlier power activation, things are going to work differently this time. The dinner will be private, just the Beilschmidts, myself and you of course, where the King would give his official commence. Our power activation is set to begin tomorrow morning in training grounds, so we can begin training ourselves immediately."

Feliciano nodded to this. He had only been here a couple of minutes, met with his Jack, and already was given duties and things to look forward to. They wanted to quickly accommodate him to their rhythm. The sooner the better.

“Feliciano? Feliciano is that you?” The voice had grown of course, nothing compared to the still voice cracking of his teenage years.

“Gilbert?” Feliciano guessed, then noticing the two figures that were coming close.

“Götter im Himmel! It really is you!” Gilbert instantly rushed forward and Feliciano matched his pace, ecstatic and grateful to at least be given a chance to meet early with at least one of the Beilschmidts.

“Oh my." Gilbert had to stop, to truly take him to his eyes, wondered at his changes. “Look at you, look at you,” he smirked, reaching to hug him and Feliciano just couldn’t deny, both a tightening grasp on each other as they swayed and laughed.

It was just like it had been.

Gilbert had grown taller, more define facial features, a more broad body to go along compared to the lanky figure he had back when he was a teenager. But he still held his same headstrong charisma, prideful, with that same teasing smirk and those same mischievous red eyes.

“Let me take a better look.” He pulled himself away to look at him from head to toe, even taking his hand to give him a twirl to not leave any part of him unseen from his curious eyes. “Fuck the Aces’ decision. Can I marry you instead?”

“Gilbert!” The figure beside him scolded.

“I'm kidding,” he laughed.

He still had to take him into another embrace and Feliciano did not mind this at all. It was just so nice to see someone that could give him stability and a familiar welcome into the castle.

“Wait till my brother takes a look at you.”

“He’ll be falling head over heels in no time.”

Feliciano ignored that comment, finally recognizing the other voice as Monika, glowing at her and taking his next tightening embrace to her.

Of course she had aged, but it didn’t do anything to hide her beauty, her comfort, kindness and overall welcome. It was still the same scent, the same embrace and arms.

He wished so much it would be the same for Ludwig.

“Oh look at you,” she took his face in her hands, caressing adoringly, “you grew so beautifully, and I hope just as kind as you had been."

“I assure you Monika,” he bowed in promise.

“You have plenty of time to truly show me,” she chuckled.

The three of them gave Feliciano a quick tour of the castle, taking him to many spacious rooms to study or just to relax, two libraries, one of the four ballrooms, the breakfast room, halls and views to see the gardens or even the extend of the city. Feliciano marbled at everything, showing his truest interest and bewilderment in loud words and long compliments. They spent much of the reminder of the day laughing, talking of old times and stories of their time apart. Through it, the three realized that Feliciano had truly not changed from that kind, talkative and excitable boy who showed every true emotion even to his fingers and legs. They wanted more time with him, more time to stroll the castle and see much more of what it had to offer, but the tolling of a loud bell signified that they should be preparing to head down to Feliciano’s welcome dinner and officiating from the King.

Those bells tolling sounded along with the rapid increase of Feliciano’s heart, not only signifying the dinner for his arising officiating, but his long awaited meeting with Ludwig.

Monika, Gilbert and Kiku, noticing his distress, placed gentle hands on him and each gave him encouraging words, calming him as they come down from the route they had traversed up the castle.

To think that there was still so much to see. But there would be plenty of time for that, now it was time that Feliciano met with with old best friend. His King and future husband.

Chapter End Notes

I assure you that the next chapter will finally be Ludwig and Feliciano’s meeting. I did think it was going to be included with this chapter, but it was just too long to include and I didn’t want to make you guys wait too long for a chapter. Hopefully I can post it before I leave to Europe.

EDITED: On 24.10.2024

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

> With how things are looking, I might actually have time to post one more chapter before leaving, but let's see how things go the next two weeks. I know something that most of you have been waiting for happens in this chapter, and I hope eh…you enjoy it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The very same crowd that had welcomed Feliciano still lay in waiting, although now much more still, talking, sitting or sharing from the food they had with themselves or the servants brought outside from the castle.

"Are they waiting for something?" Feliciano had asked Kiku, just finishing in changing into the clothes the servants back in Italy had made for his officiating. The servants here had brought it for him and he had changed in a near room to the main dining hall. Kiku made sure Feliciano's vest, jacket and belt were tightened and all seals well presented on his chest, and Feliciano made sure that all of Kiku's sashes were well tied and that his hakama and hitatare lay soothed enough without a single fold or crisp. They both admired how richly decorated both their clothing were, so much gold and red jewels in beautiful patterns, each made from hard working families that truly wanted them to look the best they could for their first meeting with King Aldrich and officiate them well into the first steps of royalty.

"They're waiting for the King to announce that we have been officiated to begin the year of arising," Kiku told him, joining Feliciano as they watched through a curtained window outside to the multitudes.

"At least the servants are attending to them, but they still shouldn't wait outside this long."

"It's a way to show their respects to the arising rulers. They also hope we can offer them some sort of blessing and prosperity once presented."

"Will we?"

"Ludwig might. Our own power has not been activated yet." Kiku turned, like it had all been forgotten, behind him as he headed toward the door, yet Feliciano looked on, sincerely worried over them. He looked up to the sky hoping it wouldn't rain and that the air wasn't so chilly for them. Could he send some servants to give them scarfs and blankets just in case?

"Feliciano!" Kiku called.

But he had to go, he had to let the curtain fall and join Kiku.

The dining room was only down the hall, a couple of steps only, the large doors separating them from what they were to be presented. On command by Kiku, the guards opened the doors and the room seemed to alight just for them. It was just as richly decorated as the rest of the castle, walls painted in incredible scenes of surely stories about their gods and moments of their history. A beautiful chandelier hung, which gave the room a gold lighting even with all the red that surrounded them. A large table was adorned just as richly as the room, with a buffet of food already presented. Even to Feliciano, who was from Italy, a province that had a stereotype of grandmothers who fueled their children with large amounts of food was impressed with the vastness that he was sure half was going to be left to waste.

At their entrance, some figures that had been sitting stood and began applauding their arrival. Feliciano bowed following Kiku's lead, quite nervous to even depart from him as they made their way down and took the seats reserved for them.

The ones that were present were surely priests and then the Jack that sat right across Kiku. Feliciano remembered him well and gave him a friendly wave. The Jack, although confused, still waved to him, managing a smile. Feliciano looked for anyone else on the table, the seats surely meant for the King, Queen and the prince clearly empty. The only Beilschmidts present were Reinhardt, Ludwig's father, who bowed and waved in welcome, Monika and Gilbert.

Another bell tolled from a distance, and with that sound the doors opened once again and in came the couple of the King and Queen, both holding hands and bowing together to all. All, even the other Beilschmidts, Kiku and Feliciano, stood and bowed in return, taking their seats once they made their way down the sides of the table to the only two at the end. They were prepared as thrones, standing taller than the rest of the seats. Upon sitting, finally Feliciano could take a look to the elder rulers and they could meet properly.

"Feliciano," the King greeted, a welcoming smile on his face that gave Feliciano that very confidence to smile back to him, seeing nothing but the same King who he had spent time with as a child.

He seemed genuinely happy to see him, just as the Queen, who hadn't stopped smiling and seemed to be holding herself from going up and hugging him instead.

Their true age was starting to show on them. Both their hairs had grayed more than the last time Feliciano had seen them, new wrinkles and the stress of their decades ruling now clearly marked. Yet, what a graceful and beautiful couple they still made, with strength and power that never ceased from their movements and even gazes as they looked on proudly to Feliciano. It was a power that was now to dwindle as they passed it on to them and they could finally retire in peace.

"Healthy, poised, truly adequate and may I say that you grew as handsomely as everyone expected you to."

Feliciano bowed his head, not being able to hide such a large smile.

"Your grandfather wrote to us occasionally about your growth. He mentioned you were hard working, with undying kindness and good qualifications on the small tests he usually gave

you.”

“Were expecting the best from you, but this was all biased from your grandfather, you truly have to show us yourself that you possess all these qualities.”

“I will try my best,” Feliciano assured them, bowing once again.

“You don’t have to bow so often."

“Leave him, he’s very nervous,” the Queen easily noticed.

“About what? There’s nothing to-” a glare from his Queen reminded him. “Ah yes, Ludwig." A pleasant smile crossed his face, instantly remembering all the times the two used to spend time together as children, always an assurance of happiness to them, that made them know that Ludwig was well trusted, had a good friend in which he could confide and that would grow to be the Queen they hoped.

“Nothing to worry about, Feliciano. You’ll see soon enough that Ludwig grew to be a grandson I’m very well proud of.”

“He will be an honor for you to have as a husband,” the Queen made sure, a trust in her smile that made Feliciano confident in her words.

Maybe he really shouldn’t be this nervous. Just calm breaths, sit straight, proud, a positive mentality and he could- the doors opened and it had all disappeared like passing wind.

The prince opened them himself, and with the strength he possessed, it came very easy and without the effort it took the very guards to try. Feliciano couldn’t look, he maintained his gaze frozen in the empty plate before him, the nervousness crashing on him like never before.

“I assume Feliciano is already here.”

His voice, nothing at all like the childish one he knew, but deep, strong and already so commanding, the mentioning of his name sending shivers and making him wish to hide underneath the table just so the Prince wouldn’t see him squirm. Everyone applauded his welcome, but Feliciano couldn’t even bring himself to move his hands.

Ludwig began to move forward into the room, Feliciano’s senses heightened to the point that he could even feel Ludwig’s steps. They were as powerful as his very voice and the presence he felt behind him was towering, surely belonging to a man that was tall and robust. He turned at the end, greeting his parents, his grandparents, his brother, Kiku, and finally, taking the seat right before Feliciano across the table. He already felt his eyes on him, heavy and only adding the weight of the great anxiousness he surely made everyone on the table see clearly. Feliciano took a deep breath, tried to cease his shaking and when he knew he was stable enough, he looked up to him to let their eyes connect once again.

Ludwig admired how handsome indeed Feliciano had grown, just as they had written. There was a delicateness to his features that made him younger than his age, his eyes still shone in

bronze beautifully, his hair the same curls and waves, a picture come alive of those old Italian paintings of demi-gods and protagonists of love stories and tragedies.

But Ludwig, he…he…was this even Ludwig? Yes, there was no doubt, it was him. Feliciano knew those eyes well and the blonde shade of his hair was very much the same, only slightly darker, now slicked back and not loose as he always had it when they were kids. But that expression was just so different, hardened and intense, like he was trying to stab him with mere looks.

It had been ten years, Feliciano knew he was going to have great changes, but not to this extent in which he shone like the true height of masculinity, with the same defined and strong features that his brother and grandfather possessed. Even with his capes and suits, he could tell the growth of his body underneath, much broad and muscular. It all made him look much older than twenty.

He was not the small and weak boy he once was, but a grown and mature man that held in just his physique the new power that this kingdom needed for an arising ruler. He got from him the same vibes King Aldrich gave when he stood tall and would intimidate with mere presence and gaze, ones that used to make Feliciano cry as a child.

Ludwig had definitely changed, and like the village boy had said, to the point of being unrecognizable, only but his eyes to give away to who he had been to Feliciano. He had never felt so inferior, so small, like he was just a shadow that he could easily blow away with a sway of his hand. Sure, everyone told him he had grown, comments on how handsome and beautiful, but never about strength, never about maturity, hell some people still confused him for a girl. He still couldn't even speak, only stare on with intense silence, one that Ludwig only helped on, that the rest of those who were present helped as well.

They stared expecting…something. Shouts, screams, hugs, kisses, maybe even for Feliciano to run across the table and give all the embraces they hadn't shared in ten years. But nothing, nothing but serious and continuing gazes, to both of them as if they were the only ones in the table, using this first meeting to examine each other, take in these changes, admit that their best friend was before them, there finally after all the time they had waited.

Everyone was indeed tiring from these continuous looks of nothing but eyes, of mouths trembling in hopes to say something but nothing coming. King Aldrich gave out a fake cough, just the sound needed to grab both the men's attention, react and return movement to themselves once again.

"Yes Ludwig, Feliciano is here," he simply said to get some sort of words out.

Ludwig nodded, returning his gaze to the arising Queen and everyone though that it would take more minutes of staring to answer again.

"Oh, then," he cleared his throat, sat even straighter in his chair, returning that fearsome stature that made Feliciano once again forget who he was. "Welcome to Germany, welcome to Berlin, and welcome to the castle, Feliciano." Even the way he addressed him had changed, like they were strangers meeting for the first time.

“Thank you…” Feliciano simply said, but everyone looked on, especially Ludwig…for what? It took Feliciano slightly to understand, and when he did, it only helped this new growing pain, this stab, this kind of betrayal. “…your highness.”

A clap from the King interrupted any other hurtful though. “We may eat.”

And everyone in the table instantly went for their picking, taking into their plates, servants coming in to serve them their drinks or any other things the attendants asked. Feliciano, with his constant big appetite, didn’t find the appease in the food anymore, only taking small servings that he didn’t even eat completely. His eyes dared venture to Ludwig often, trying to find any familiarity in his movements, in his speaking with Gilbert, but it was all strange, it was all careful, refine, as if he was trying to show respect to even the utensils and every single bite before it was taken in his mouth. It was all nothing like he remembered him being, in fact, he was acting like the very adults they used to make fun of and they talked about never wanting to be. Many times their eyes caught each other, but they would quickly move away, as if trying to erase their presence from around them.

When dessert came in, King Aldrich began his speech of welcome. He talked about the challenges they were to face in the year ahead, about the glory of the Hearts kingdom they needed to preserve, his proudness on being able to see that the three future rulers already showed enough their part, but they needed to act it. They needed to show not only to the current royals, but to the entire kingdom, and that was the point of the year of the arising. With that, he snapped his fingers and new banners rolled out from the ceiling. All servants stopped what they were doing and placed quickly on their attire a small red pin heart. Ludwig and Feliciano saw as the mark the Aces had made on their fingers as children when they decided that they were to be engaged become much clearer, a deep red that now served as a reminder of the pact they were to fulfill and the new stage they were traversing.

“You have officially begun your year of arising.”

The room went into loud applause, they all stood, everyone giving congratulations to the three future royals. Aldrich then led them forward out of the dining room and into the halls, until they reached one of the frontal balconies. He presented himself to his people, giving out the announcement that the three future rulers were officiated, and thus the three were presented to the very large crowd that shouted in clamor, loud to the point that Feliciano though they were trying to make the entire city shake. Ludwig and Kiku bowed and waved, and thus Feliciano followed their lead, although much messier and excited compared to the other two. But their people did not mind, enough was seeing them, enough was simply being acknowledged and enough was watching them start before them all, a new hope for shinning prosperity in the future.

“Feliciano, is everything all right?” Kiku had asked him as he led him toward what would be his room.

Feliciano couldn’t lie, his emotions were seen clear, and denying would only get Kiku more concerned. He rubbed his arms, took calming breaths and hope that the hurt wouldn’t be noticeable in his voice.

“Ludwig…changed a lot.” It had failed, it still remained as obvious.

“It has been ten years, Feliciano.”

“I know, but I didn’t expect him to change this much, and to…just greet me like that, as if I was just a peasant who sneaked into the officiating banquet." He rubbed his face in embarrassment.

“Maybe he was just nervous."

“I doubt it. He doesn’t seem like the kind of person to even get nervous anymore."

“There were all those people around, perhaps he was following a protocol. I’m sure if you two manage some time alone together, he’ll be able to act properly and talk as you used to. You’ll have plenty of time since you’re both sharing a room.”

Feliciano froze halfway through the hall. He had completely forgotten about that.

“Something the matter?”

“I-I’ll manage." He didn’t say anything else on the subject and changed their topic of conversation about the food and the decorations that showcased that the castle was currently giving its arising. The conversation was as long as they had taken them to reach the room for the arising King and Queen, one of the bottom rooms of the castle's sphere, already a tiring walk for Feliciano, who didn’t know how he could possibly walk this much every day from now on just to get to his room.

“I’ll be only a couple of floors down if you need me. Good luck with Ludwig.”

“Grazie, Kiku. Have a good night.”

Kiku bowed to him and left, just as Feliciano was to comment on how he really shouldn’t be doing that so often to him. They were friends after all. He gave out a sigh and opened the tall yet simplistic light red doors to his room, quiet a relief to find it empty with no one, only for himself to admire its beauty. It was large indeed as Ludwig had once told him, rounded, clean, the floors and walls practically shinning from its outmost care. There were no paintings as the ones around the castle, simple red walls, brown cabinets and tables, a glass door that lead to a large balcony. Some flags and banners hanged from the wall, and every piece of furniture held some sort of Hearts symbol. The room was surely surrounded by tall glass windows, Feliciano could tell by the dim moonlight that still managed to escape through the deep red curtains that covered them. A magnificent light would surely enter once they were opened in the morning. An extra door stood to the left side of the room, one Feliciano assumed would be the single bathroom. A little carpeted area held some sofas and a bookshelf was available, Feliciano tempted to take its rest, but he would have much preferred to take it in his own bed.

There were two, not exactly a large space to separate them, but enough to distinguish, both sharing a single table in the center that already held some written papers, pens and a decorating rose flower. They were both large, with rich red sheets already placed, many

fluffed pillows that Feliciano wanted to embrace in his sleep. The rear was a beautifully carved one with flowers and their main Hearts symbol, from it a canopy curtain arising, which they could keep back or move over them if they wished.

All his luggage was already there, piled to the right side of the room, some cabinets and wardrobes opened readily for him to hang and put his things. He would find another time to work on that, right now, there was only one single item he wanted to remove. He went forward to one of his trunks and only took out the little music box Lovino had gifted him. He placed it in the little table right between the beds. It was its perfect spot, a reminder for every morning he woke up, and a little place to go to whenever he felt stressed or worried. That little box held a great reminder of Italy, of his family and home, and he could almost feel their assurance through it, one he needed rather desperately at the moment. He took the left bed as his seat and carefully opened it, watching the gears turn and rise and play the familiar song he adored. He didn't sing it, but hum it, distracted in the movement, in letting his fingers trace invisibly the notes on the bed, bringing forward to him the relief. He wished he could have had it for the entire night, helping to lull him to sleep as the song itself had done in the past, but the Prince's entrance made him shut it instantly, the same fears growing, the same stillness and the refusal to look forward to the direction Ludwig was in as he shut the door closed, surely feeling displeased at the mess of trunks on the side of the room.

His steps inched closer and closer to Feliciano, and still he didn't turn, the little trunk protected in his hands as if Ludwig was to steal it. Ludwig stopped right before him, as tall and commanding as he had been on the table, with a prestigious stand that did not even fall in the privacy and secureness of his room…and the presence of his childhood best friend. Even without looking, Feliciano could feel a scolding glare, one that he had no other choice than to look up to and face.

"That's my bed," Ludwig simply said.

"Oh, oh, sorry." He instantly stood and took his seat in the other one, seeming to glue himself there and not offer any other sort of movement.

Ludwig stared at him, for once a worried glance over his great stillness. He knew that Feliciano had never been one to remain frozen for so long, but he didn't bother to do something about it, in fact, they continued their stares, judging and part of it admiring as it had been in the dinner. No words, no sort of communication, only Feliciano's breathing and Ludwig riding parts of his clothing, while always his eyes remained on him, never breaking the hardened concentration in it.

Did he want something? Was Ludwig expecting Feliciano to fold his clothing or even get out of the room? It was intimidating, it was fearsome, and Feliciano wanted nothing more than to hide from it.

"The castle expects us to wake up early each morning, I usually do so at the soonest sunrise and take my bath quickly afterwards, after so you are free to use it whenever you want. This does not apply to your schedules, especially for tomorrow. There's a lot do about your power once it's activated and I rather that we get over the first blows quickly. Also, I do not want you late for the rest of your teachings with my grandmother. I do not care if these are your first days in the castle, you will adjust to it and I hope not to hear any complaints from

anyone. Understand?" He spoke, breaking the stares and speaking as militant as a general than an actual arising King.

Feliciano gulped and simply nodded, enough of an approval for Ludwig.

"I arrive back to the room around ten each night, sometimes I take a bath, sometimes I don't, be attentive to my mood to see if you're going to bathe yourself during that time, but I much preferred you did so beforehand or after. Keep your things on your side on the room as well as yourself. If you see me working, don't interrupt me, don't speak to me, act as if I'm not even there. Are we clear?"

"…Yes," Feliciano managed to answer and yet Ludwig insistently starred on, maddening and insulted. "…your highness."

"Always address me as such," was his last command, ridding of everything until he was solely in a loose white shirt and his long undergarments. It gave Feliciano more of a chance to look at the muscles he had grown, but he held no interest, it didn't mean anything anymore.

Ludwig instantly fell to sleep as soon as his body hit the bed and he was well covered for the night, facing the direction away from Feliciano's bed. Feliciano gave out a sigh as he began to rid of his own clothing, only leaving himself in his white blouse and short underpants, settling on the bed just as Ludwig had done, facing away, the little chest still tight in his hold.

Despite the incredible comfort of the bed, it wasn't enough to console his emotions, broken and tearful, wishing that Ludwig was too deep in sleep to be able to hear his small whimpers that were in the end what pulled him into his slumber.

He couldn't bring himself to play the song, it reminded him too much of a hope for Ludwig that was now nothing.

Chapter End Notes

EDITED: On 24.10.2024

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

> It took a little bit longer than expected on this month but I hope it's good. All right, this is my final chapter until August. I leave Saturday. So I call a hiatus on Feliciano and the King of Hearts until then. When I return, don't worry, there is still A WHOLE LOT to happen and I will continue. Happy July!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Your highness! Your highness!" Someone called, a feminine voice.

"Mamma?" Feliciano wondered, tossing and turning until finally the fort he had managed upon himself of pillows fell off, and he was met with a new morning light on him. It was not as much as he would usually want, but enough to wake him, to open his eyes to not his mother, but a uniformed maid. "Oh," he sat up, rubbed his eyes and stretched. "Buon giorno, Signorina," he greeted pleasantly to her.

"Good morning, your highness," she bowed.

"Please, you don't have to do that, Feliciano or Feli is enough."

"Yes, your- I mean, Feliciano. It's already pretty late and you're supposed to be at the training grounds for your power activation," she said as calmly as she could, not meaning to anger or rush him.

That truly woke him, eyes widened, only thinking about Ludwig's words last night about arriving on time. He groaned slightly, crawling over the bed and trying to move away from the comfort of the blankets, but he was still too tired to truly stand. He looked over to his right and saw that Ludwig's bed was empty, fixed and prepare as just as he saw it when he arrived last night. He was probably already waiting in the training grounds.

"Thank you, Signorina, I'll change and be on my way." He finally stood and headed to one of his trunks, picking his wear for the day.

He changed quickly in the bath room while the maid went on with her room cleaning.

The trainings grounds were at the very bottom of the castle, at what Feliciano though was the ugliest and most dreaded part. It was dark, grey, elder walls slowly falling apart from the constant hits they were given throughout the ages. It was a surprise it was still standing, for even the arches that held the ceiling were broken and some simply had a hole in which

sunlight and air came through. It needed much more ventilation than that, for the heat was intense and Feliciano was starting to regret bringing a tight fitting jacket.

Men were already off fighting with swords and other weapons resounding all across the area, magic being thrown into the air and only adding to this very chaotic scene in multitudes to make Feliciano think that their entire army was there.

How was he going to find the officials here for his activation?

“The arising Queen has arrived,” a man had called, loudly and clear for the entire area to freeze and look up to the stairs that Feliciano was currently making his way down from. He tensed, standing half way through the steps as all the men and women bowed in his welcome. Feliciano bowed back, giving them all the smile that was just like the glow of the sun they needed. He continued down, watching as all filed up into a large line, emptying the entire arena for surely the space both Feliciano and Kiku needed to release the first of their power. It was then that he finally noticed, in the back hidden well by the crumbling pillars that had blocked Feliciano’s view, King Aldrich, along with his Jack, Kiku and Ludwig, who was the first to spot him, his glare surely scolding for coming late even after his warning last night. Feliciano decided to keep his stare away from him, not wanting to feel more of this weight and this pain first thing in the morning. He joined them hoping to remain by Kiku’s side, but he was pulled by the Jack to stand beside Ludwig and it only made him more hesitant.

Ludwig and Kiku stood readily, without any worry and confident about what they were to show, chests high and eyes already pinpointing where their first power was going to be thrown at. Feliciano had no idea what to do, and simply stood on his heels and swayed as he waited to be commanded. The King, along with his Jack, stood before the line, turning towards the three future rulers, examining well how they could properly start.

“I believe a single Feuerpfeil would be enough,” the Jack suggested and King Aldrich agreed. “Ludwig, as I told you.”

Ludwig bowed and stood first before Kiku, precise and composed, staring at only his forehead.

“We’ll start with our arising Jack,” King Aldrich announced to all. “Kiku, Feliciano, listen well to my words. Ludwig can tell you from experiencing this at a very young age that you will feel pain, one strong enough to be felt across your whole body. You’re all adults now, and won’t go through what Ludwig did, so I want you to try and ignore the pain as best as you can. When your power is activated, concentrate, create a bow in your head, elaborate it, make it as big and detailed as possible. Feliciano, this will surely come easy to you. Once you have it, make it, as soon as you feel the first pumps from your blood. It will come easy if you have it clear in your mind. A single movement from your hand will be enough to have it. Instantly aim it, wait until it’s fully made, and when you feel the height of the pain and power, shoot whatever comes out into the arena, this is why we left the space.” He presented it, indeed an extensive area to let their blows be as big as they wanted. “What comes out is fire since it’s our kingdom element and our bodies will react more freely to it. If you come out with anything else, then you’ll leave us all very impressed.” He moved away out of target, the Jack following behind, the space now truly open for Kiku to take his first turn.

“Ready?” Ludwig asked him, placing a thumb on his forehead, the rest of his fingers over his head. Kiku nodded, closing his eyes and readying himself for the new spur of energy that will start after the chanting of the priests.

Ludwig took a deep breath, focused and the priest began the words of Latin, until a yellow dot began to appear on Kiku’s forehead, from the spot Ludwig had his thumb over. The Latin chanting stopped and Ludwig removed his finger.

“The activation is complete,” he announced, moving apart, leaving the space clear for Kiku to start.

The yellow dot disappeared, and the boiling of his blood started, power arising through every corner of his body. He took a deep breath, calmed down, ignored the growing pain and moved forward, forming the space he needed for the bow he had concocted in his mind. With one last breath, he made the stance he usually made for his own shooting practice, using his hands to prepare himself as he had one and it was there that he created, forming a stringed red one that seemed rather simple. The only thing that stood out beautifully was the red shield he created at the top, crafted flowers on it that even came to life, flowing behind him like he was the tree. The very petals helped to create the arrow, a metal one that seemed potent enough. He aimed, fire appeared and its tip and it was swung, aimed precisely at some blankets the soldiers had hanged as targets. Kiku had stopped to admire his work, his perfect aim, a smile of proudness, one that Feliciano clapped on excitedly to. But the force on Kiku’s body continued, a pain that was starting to grow in its strength.

“Remember, keep shooting until your body has released all the first blows,” Aldrich told.

Kiku nodded, prepared his bow and continued shooting arrow after arrow, until the first sheet they had placed had burned out completely, leaving the sheet behind it free for Feliciano to take as his target. Kiku was starting to tire, his breathing heavy, but he felt better to know that the pain was diminishing, shown in the fact that his fire weakened and the petals that flew off had completely stopped.

“I believe that is enough,” Ludwig said, enough of a sign for Kiku to stop, to let his body return to its normal rhythm, now at peace with the joining of magic. His hands fell and the bow disappeared in shimmering dust, exhaustion taking over him, already a wish to rest or at least have a calming drink. He settled back with the rest, now leaving the space for the arising Queen to take.

“Feliciano,” Aldrich easily commanded with his name to come forward, and he did, hurriedly and with clear nervousness. He stood straight, took deep breaths and prepared himself for the activation. Ludwig was quite suddenly before him, taking his breath and making him loose whatever composure he held. He tried to look away, but couldn’t settle his eyes anywhere but on his own. At least those remained the same, no matter the intensity and what seemed to be anger in them. There was carefulness in the way Ludwig placed his thumb and hand on his head, the heavy stare disappearing and for once looking relaxed.

“Ready?” He asked in a sweet tone, one that instantly reminded him of that child that used to care so much for him.

The pain he would feel from the power would be nothing compared to the emotional turmoil this very man caused him.

“Mhm,” he nodded, sadness evident in his voice, but Ludwig understood it as just being afraid for his activation.

The chants started once again, this time more potent, long lasting, taking more concentration and the hold becoming harder. The chanting stopped, a sign for Ludwig to release himself, knowing that the activation was granted. Feliciano wished he had more of his touch, even if this hardened and simple hold from his hand, which had him trying to reach his head for more. But he moved aside, and Feliciano knew he had a power to release and commands to fulfill. That simple touch was still nothing like the caring hugs and kisses they had shared once. He thought that he should have nothing to miss from Ludwig’s current touch when he had magic to use.

The tingling arose, and instantly Feliciano tried to make the earlier stance Kiku had taken. He had never really taken archery and what he knew was from what he had seen Lovino do, since he had taken it for a short time. His stance could be wrong, but it didn’t matter to the rest, what they wanted to see was the release of his power.

The moment Aldrich had told them to create a bow in their mind, Feliciano already had it set, so it began appearing as Kiku had done easily.

This one was much larger, large to the point that the soldiers though Feliciano was creating a harp instead of a simple bow. It was as large as a harp, in a beautiful gold, with red rose rubies encrusted in it, several strings to shoot, but also to begin a melody if Feliciano so wished. It got bigger, to the point that it was becoming a hassle just for the arising Queen to hold.

“Just put it on the floor,” Ludwig suggested, so he did.

It was indeed much better, it could still be used and he was in a more comfortable position. Once it was set, Feliciano pulled the strings and settled his aim in the same direction Kiku had started. A similar metal arrow had appeared, with its bottom wings as golden as the bow. Feliciano then awaited to let the fire come to its tip, but it remained still, nothing appearing and it made him panic, for the pain in his body was strengthening too much. He though that he would burn himself, letting the fire ravage inside him and escape through his very skin.

Concentrate on the tip of the arrow, concentrate, concentrate, he chanted to himself.

He felt the power release and reach to the very tip, for once a relief, for suddenly the pain left him like a simple cough out of his mouth. It was odd. Surely he was supposed to continue to feel pain, but it was gone, and instead he saw before him as the fire began to grow, and grow, and grow. He panicked, everyone in the room panicked, more so when they realized that sparks of lightning joined.

“Release it, Feliciano! Release it!” Aldrich shouted.

Hoping to get it as far away from him as possible, Feliciano simply shot it, not caring where it hit just as long as it was far away from them. But as soon as he did, the shot he blew was gigantic, enough of a light to blind everyone and look away, a heat so intense that some even felt slight patches of their clothes burning. It hit the target of the blankets, burning it entirely as well as the other three blankets that were tied behind it, reaching the very wall that luckily were strong enough to only burn, slightly shaking and letting some debris fall on the ground.

When it had all stopped, the soldiers dared look first, giving a clear that everyone was safe to leave from whatever hide they had taken. Feliciano couldn't bring himself to look, covering his eyes with his arms, close to running over to the stairs and heading to the secureness of the upper castle.

After the dust cleared, the only sound that dared pierce the sudden silence after the explosion was the King's. "Should have expected this from a Valenti Queen," Aldrich sighed.

Since the words were not that of a scold, hesitantly Feliciano let go of his own covering, finally looking up, standing with some sort of pride as if trying to ignore what had just happened.

"It seems the gods granted you more power than usual," Aldrich noticed.

"It's our first Italian queen in centuries, plus he is of Romulus line," a male soldier had commented.

"Does this change anything?" A female one asked.

They did have certain specific teachings set for him, from long before he even turned twenty, but they weren't expecting his first release to be so powerful.

"Does it still hurt?" Aldrich suddenly asked.

Feliciano focused on any weight or hurt in his body, but nothing, purely gone, with no exhaustion or even a burn on himself.

"We had originally planned to give you two magic lessons each week, but is it possible to make it three times a week?" He asked one of the main organizers, who quickly went to his book of scheduling to check. He nodded an assurance to the king, and it was instantly set. "Then it's done. Feliciano, three times a week, at this very hour. I'll have the servants make you a schedule and place it in your room."

Without any other information he turned away, a sign for the soldiers to take back their training ground and continue to fight as they had done before the visit of the royals. Some headed to try and clean out the soot that stuck to the walls or the ground, making it easier for them to continue without worries of what could suddenly fall on them. It wasn't anything new, the place was already crumbling down long before Feliciano gave that large surprising blast.

The Jack took Kiku by his shoulder and led him off to leave, Aldrich gave a simple nod to Ludwig and he followed behind him. Feliciano lay still wondering what it was that he was

supposed to do next, waiting awkwardly for a sort of command.

“Feliciano, my Queen awaits you in her main study room. Run along now, you must immediately begin your lessons,” Aldrich told him lastly before disappearing out, Ludwig giving Feliciano one last commanding glare for him to head out as soon as possible, not wanting him to waste any time.

Well he would have loved to go if someone offered him directions, but everyone was distracted in their own things, as if the arising Queen was not even there.

He sighed, it seemed like he would have to go find it himself.

After useless strolling around the castle, he had given up and had asked for a near maid to help, who gladly lead him all the way.

The Queen’s study room was basically at the opposite side of where he was, but on the way Feliciano traverse new areas, new paintings, new banners, which many were of the arising. He saw new decorated floors, the passing of a bridge that held a wonderful view of the city. The maid had to constantly look back, fearing that the arising Queen would lose himself with his constant staring and admiration.

“Your highness,” she called, pointing to the very large doors that rested at the end, beautiful, coming to take a closer look at the details of the flowers and symbols on it.

“She’s right behind these doors,” she bowed and headed off, leaving the arising Queen to his duties.

He gave a quick thanks and settled his eyes back on the door, a little nervous to open them, hesitating as he gave a rather simple knock. The doors instantly opened and instead of meeting a simple office room like his own grandfather’s had been, it felt like he was coming into a library, the vastness surely taking the whole tower, for the spiral stairs that lead upwards and downwards. Not a space was left without a bookshelf, an opened book, a portrait, or some item of value or even a charm. Documents also framed the walls or were presented in glass pedestals, surely important ones that had written upon them important proclamations signed and sealed by past Queens. In the center was a rather simplistic round desk, where the Queen sat, working on some papers and reading, glasses on her face showing how dedicated she was being with her work. She looked so stern as she did, but when she looked up to meet with her student, she smiled gleefully, easily setting aside her work, standing, taking off her glasses and going over to meet him as welcoming as she could.

“You are here,” she took his arms in a shake, and Feliciano couldn’t hold the cheek kisses he gave her.

“Come, come, sit,” she ushered, offering a cushioned seat in front of her desk, taking back her seat and readying herself for the talk she was to give him.

From what she could see, he was perfectly fine, a proud smile and expecting eyes. Yes, that's exactly how an arising Queen should start, and she hoped he continued like this.

"Excited you must be, eager to begin."

"I want to learn the best I can for my position, I confide very well in what you are to teach me," he told her.

What a charming boy, Louis thought. "It will be a lot, heavy and will probably give you sleepless nights, but that is all to be expected of such a position and I hope your grandfather prepared you enough in that aspect." He nodded, remembering all the times Augusto had purposely given him loads of tests, which ended with him sleeping on top of his desk at late hours of the night, just to test how he could deal with sudden heavy workloads and in how much time he could deal with it.

"As you know, a Queen is in charge to the dealings of their people and doing what is best for all. It requires you to know a lot about our culture, language, economics, but also courtesy and manners," as she said so she pointed over to an entire bookshelf that surely held all the books Feliciano could read about those subjects in if he wasn't being taught by the Queen. "Seeing as you have just arrived, I'll give you this day free to read."

She stood and picked a small and simplistic book for Feliciano, surely one that he could read in one sitting in any room he wished.

It was a book listing all the important holidays, festivals, balls and others feasts that were important to the Hearts Kingdom, which were also widely celebrated across the city and in the very castle.

"Tomorrow, we will start with a rather simple assignment. It's usually the very first task given to an arising Queen." Feliciano gazed up curiously from the small book. "Along with my help and of course the maids and servants, you will prepare your own welcoming ball. No matter what you think, a ball gives the Queen great examples on starting their own connections with their people, being in tune with how exactly the castle works, the culture of the city, or simply leisure time for you and your King. Stressful rulers are bound to have some negative effects on the kingdom and it helps to soothe them with a feast like this," she smiled expecting of it.

A ball? That was his first assignment? It seemed rather simple…or so he had thought.

Chapter End Notes

EDITED: On 25.10.2024

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

> A month and two weeks later- FINALLY! I hope you all enjoy it! Hopefully from now on I can continue with the normal pace I had before leaving, although with college starting again, might be slower, but no worries, I will go on!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The castle welcomed the early morning with the rushing of footsteps across the halls. All the maids ran up and down, wearing the best of their serving dresses, all surely to impress the arising Queen, ready to serve in his first commands for the preparations of his own welcoming ball. They were quite excited, smiles, giggles and ecstatic conversations eager to already see the arising Queen.

“Let’s not get carried away, girls,” Louis called to them as she made her way forward, head held high, dressed as pristinely as ever, a fair scene that had all the maids bowing in her welcome.

Louis had smiled, she would be lying if she said she didn’t like this attention and gazes full of praise. It would surely be one of the things she would miss once she would have to step down from her throne.

The throne was to be given to the very man she was going to see, surely still locked in his mess of pillows and blankets, resting away the morning lost in his heavenly sleep and dreams. Her grandson was already out and about, surely with her husband dealing with his usual teachings. She had seen him that early morning in breakfast, wondering if she should have awaken Feliciano at the same hour as her grandson.

No, that would have been too cruel. This was still Feliciano’s very first week in the castle and she knew he was not accustomed to those hours. He would be exhausted. Surely with time things would change, but for now she had no problem with arriving to his very door, coming in without even a knock, surely the lights of the hall enough to lighten the room to disturb the sleeping Queen. To her surprise there was no stirring, so she settled off to open many of the curtains in the room, letting light drown walls, floors and especially the bed.

“It is time to rise, Feliciano!” She called, but the stillness of the bed continued, not a single raise of a hand, leg, groans, or a body raising with messy bed hair. “Come Feliciano, we mustn’t waste any time,” and she pulled the covers from the bed, only to reveal but an empty spot. “Feliciano?” She called, turning and hoping to find him already standing in another area in the room, but no presence was acknowledge with her searching eyes. “Feliciano?” She called again, hoping he would come out from the bathroom or closet, but all she received was the echo of her voice.

“And I think the basil would give it an excellent touch."

“Are you sure we can do this?”

“We were given strict orders to follow the recipe as it has always been.”

“What if the arising Queen dislikes it?”

“He would like it much better with these changes, I assure you,” Feliciano told them as he pressed the dough against the counter, not minding it all as it continued to stain his simple long pink blouse shirt and tight black pants. “Do you think this is enough?”

“Perfect,” one servant saw.

“Then it’s ready for the-”

“Has anyone seen the arising Queen?” The Queen suddenly burst into the kitchen, obviously fretting over the wellbeing of the coming ruler, worried to the point that she herself came into the kitchen trying to find him.

It was a rare occurrence to have a royal in such areas. Many of the cooks have never even been in the presence of a royal before. They quickly bowed and shook with nervousness, embarrassed over how they were presented and surely the mess the kitchen was in. The only one that stood out was Feliciano, who still stood straight with his hands ready to put the dough in the near oven. He smiled in welcome to the Queen, but it went unnoticed as she searched the area desperately for any clue of the arising Queen.

“Um, I’m right here Louis,” he waved, with his ever present smile and calm like she was just another visitor in the kitchen.

The cooks looked incredulous to Feliciano, not believing and thinking him to be crazy to make these impersonations. He could give them great trouble. But their eyes widened to even more shock when great relief shone on the Queen and she rushed over to Feliciano to make sure he was all right, hands running all over him. The servants moved away slowly, nervous to be around such a powerful woman and now apparently man.

“Heavens, Feliciano, what are you doing here and…” she looked down to what he was wearing, even feeling disgusted, “wearing this.”

“I was going to be in the castle all day, so I decided to wear something comfortable,” he easily told her, no minding at all how he looked or even her reactions.

“But you look so poor and…dirty."

“Oh, I was just helping the cooks make herbs bread, wasn’t I?” He looked to them, but they remained yet as frozen, not sure what words to say or what movements to make.

Only one of the young women dared speak: “You-you’re the arising Queen?”

“Of course.”

And instantly they bowed, spewing apologies about behavior and how they had presented themselves to him.

“There’s no need! I wanted to come down here and be with you all."

“Feliciano, the cooks can cook the food without your help. Your duty is to simply eat what they prepare in the dining room."

“The bread was tasteless and I don’t eat sausages for breakfast. I came here to help them.” He joined their side again, picking the dough and still hoping to let it cook. At least one of the women had opened an oven for him and Feliciano quickly used the chance to put it in and let it begin.

Louis was ready to scold him for his actions, a strong glare and ready to point fingers, but then she had noticed something.

“When did you wake up?” She settled on asking.

“Ludwig woke me up." The moment he woke up himself. He was insisting, calling and even kicking the bed to get Feliciano to wake. He didn’t stop or leave the room until Feliciano had stood up from the bed.

Louis should have told her grandson something before he did that, but it was done, and at least he had Feliciano awake earlier than expected.

“Well, if you’re done, we can immediately start."

“Sure, I had a cup of coffee at least, if anything I’ll have the herbs bread later."

“So it seems. Come this way now, Feliciano.” And she ushered him out of the room to follow.

Feliciano wished goodbye to the cooks, telling them that he hoped he had time to join them in their lunch or dinner making, and they were all actually looking forward to it.

“First thing is first." She dropped many scrolls against her desk, some maps of the castle, others color schemes, fabrics, and collection of different items to decorate. Feliciano looked through most of them quickly, as if Louis was to test him immediately about them. “Location and theme."

“Obviously the ball room."

“You see Feliciano..." she took the very scroll Feliciano was currently holding, rolling up much more to reveal mapped details of the entire castle. “There are four ballrooms in our castle.”

With the largeness, he should have expected it.

Louis brought her hand forward and began pointing them out. “This is our biggest one, in the very ground floor of the castle. I highly recommend you choose this one for movement in this room is much easier between the servants and for the very guests who might later want to take a stroll through the gardens.” She then moved her finger towards one of the many towers, a room taking a spacious three floors with balconies and spaces connected by spiral stairs. Overall it was small, but enough for dancing and for food to be presented. “This one is rather peculiar, but we mostly use it for more private ones and we usually decorate with much simpler things. This one over here is like a terrace to the gardens, open and fresh, perfect for the summers and for children to run around without a problem.” There was a nostalgic smile on her lips as she mentioned it and Feliciano wondered if any of her three children and other grandchildren had played and shouted in that very ballroom. For some reason he imagined himself with Ludwig as a child playing in that very place he was never given the chance to visit in his infancy. Not that they didn’t attend their very own balls back in Italy. Just to relive some of it, Feliciano wondered if he could choose it- that was until Louis pointed to the last one.

It was under a crystal clear dome, at the very center of the castle, up at the sphere, high and surely in the night enough to feel like you would be dancing with the stars. It was the finest decorated, the truest showcasing of their power and wealth with spectacular art on the walls, plentiful chandeliers, the most rich of their flags and banners, no corner left without a detail of intrigue that was bound to leave all the guests wondered and struck. It was not as large as the first one but its space was grandiose enough for the same activity the first one could bring. Louis spoke on about it, but Feliciano was taken too much by the mere picture, he couldn’t imagine the actual room.

“This one," he immediately decided.

“Feliciano, let me repeat myself, this ballroom is for very, very special occasions.”

“What kind?”

She didn’t seem to want to answer.

“Although your welcoming here is indeed special, the type of ball we wish to make will not be appropriate for such a room. The time will come for you to prepare one, but for now, I really recommend-”

“Then I chose the one by the gardens.”

“It will be too messy for your first ball. Please, let’s just go with the one in the ground floor."

“But-”

“It will be the easiest for you to manage.” Any other words would just earn another disapproval.

With a defeated sigh, Feliciano reluctantly pointed to the very ball room the Queen wished. Although it was indeed beautiful, it was still rather simplistic, just another squared room without any specific detail that made it stand out from the rest.

“Excellent choice.” She rolled the scroll quickly before Feliciano could see or even utter anything else. “Now, time to choose a theme and decorations.”

Despite how it was supposed to be a ball created by himself, Feliciano really didn’t make any choices of his own.

Louis ended up choosing the theme, the colors, the decorational items, the banners that were to be presented, the dress code of the guests, and of course the food. Nothing of the ball would have his own touch, just the usual the castle had expected from the current ruling Queen. Even so, Feliciano was expected to call out the orders and makes sure that Louis’s plans were fulfilled. He was handed a schedule Louis had prepared at that very moment, large and full, already stress weighting on Feliciano as the words continued with tedious jobs that he was already detesting. Louis had even written a special order that Feliciano should dress more appropriately, and would be even willing to turn him back to his room if he didn’t wear any of the finer things the castle had for him or the very ones his family had made for him back in Italy.

‘Your choice of wear for today is not for someone of your stature. You need to learn to show you are a Queen,' she had written more specifically.

Of course he scowled, he felt like he was being scolded like a child. Well, it wasn’t an order he was immediately going to obey to, not when he had other plans.

He rolled his sleeves and made the way he had learned towards the kitchen. Louis had given him the rest of the day for him to do as he pleased, expecting him to at least have a chance to change, but he refused to. When he entered the kitchen, of course the cooks were startled, going on with the usual bowing and proper addressing. He told them to fall at ease, that he simply wanted to join them in their cooking and make a few changes or even introduce entirely new plates for the dinner that night. After having his herb bread, which they couldn’t resist taking from as the scent that drowned the kitchen was too exquisite to hold themselves any longer, they placed utter trust and let him do as he pleased, giving him the full reign of everything he could use from the kitchen. Some worked on their usual plates, while others took to simply watching what Feliciano did and enjoying pleasant conversation with him.

“As soon as I saw that ballroom, I thought of a spectacular stellar theme. Stars, blues, purples yellows and silvers, shimmers and glitter to make it seem like we would be part of that very starry sky,” he had been telling them, cutting some vegetables for a soup he was preparing.

“That sounds amazing,” a young girl had sigh dreamily, already imagining herself dancing to such a feast with a beloved.

“Even if you couldn’t choose the crystal dome ball room, you could still create that same theme for the ground one,” one cook suggested.

“The Queen was not going to let me. She ignored all my suggestions and decided everything on her own. I was just there to take notes.” He added the vegetables, the creams, the spices

and everything else the soup needed, then mixing it, which added more the deliciousness in the air.

“That’s a bit wrong.”

“She said herself it's supposed to be a ball made by you.”

Although a small hurt in his features, he pretended it didn’t matter, moving over to the pile of potatoes and choosing the best ones, a new pot, and some other ingredients. “Yes, but after all, I’m just the arising Queen, I really don’t hold much power yet, and I don’t think Louis wants to give it up either.” He began peeling potatoes, two other maids deciding on helping him.

“She should learn to.”

“Perhaps she just…” how it pained him, how it halted his movements and made any smiles or feelings of contentment disappear, “doesn’t believe I’m capable of it.”

The kitchen went silent, for nobody knew any counseling words that could help the arising Queen. Although he was exceptionally kind to have no problem with cooking and talking to them, truth was that they had just met him that very morning and not even a week had passed since his arrival. They really didn’t know him, they really didn’t know what they could tell him, but if there was one thing that they could…

A young girl who had been preparing some sauces, changing their ingredients by Feliciano’s suggestion, came forward, joining the group that were dealing with the potato peeling. “I don’t know much about kingdom ruling, but if there’s one thing you’re surely capable of is making the best herbs bread I’ve ever had.”

A maid took a taste from the soup, eyes growing and sparkling at the taste, “an amazing soup.”

Another maid took a small little dip from the sauce, “a rich sauce.”

“And I don’t know what you’re going to do with these potatoes, but I’m sure it would be a wonderful dinner.”

And with each of their words, the glow came back into Feliciano’s eyes and his smile arose once again, more determined to peel the potatoes the best he could, worthy of royalty.

He was flying across the kitchen working on different plates, helping different cooks with great amount of energy, like no hurt had befallen on him that day. The cooks didn’t mind at all, it was all different and new from what they were accustomed to and the plates were coming out splendidly. Feliciano couldn’t show his skill in leadership through a ball, but he could show it through the kitchen, with great order, power, but still a spark of dancing and singing, kindness and understanding that seated well between all the maids, servants and cooks. It was almost like their own little feast that continued even to the coming night, and even to the time when the plates where to be presented to the royal family that was already seated waiting to dine.

Ludwig was the last to come in, having taken a short time to look at the training dogs that were usually used for scavenging and helping in battle grounds. Sure, they were in no threat of war, but Ludwig much preferred to be prepared.

“How were they?” Aldrich asked, still reading some documents that he brought to the table.

“Perfect, might wait three weeks this time for my next checking.” He took his time greeting all, taking his own chair once again, surprised then to meet with a still empty chair in front of him. “Where’s Feliciano?”

“Hopefully he went off to finally change,” Louis said dealing with her own documents.

“I assume he’s in our room then.”

“Perhaps,” Aldrich shrugged, and the room settled into silence yet again, even Gilbert sitting still as he awaited the food.

The appetizers were brought in, a servant for each attendant. Bowls were presented, a rich aroma arising to the air unlike anything they had ever had from their cooks. The soup itself looked appetizing, decorated as if it was another piece to hang in their walls.

“Excuse my timing,” Feliciano said as he served Ludwig’s own plate, crossing behind the King and Queen to sit in his own chair, where a servant had already placed his own soup.

They were all stunned, not only for his surprising entrance by the servant doors, handing a plate to his own arising King, but because he looked like a total mess, sprayed with flour and other substances, the same attire the Queen had complained about that morning. He didn’t care about their stares and already had the first sip from his soup, glowing proudly at how amazing it had come out. Not being able to resist the scent any longer, each began taking their own, a proud grin on Feliciano’s face as their eyes shoot up with surprise, casted under the spell of great taste the simple soup had brought them.

“Who made this?” Louis asked. None of their cooks had ever created something like this.

“Feliciano, your majesty,” one servant said as he had brought baskets of bread for all of them.

“Feliciano?” Both the King and Queen looked sternly to him, but none was stronger than Ludwig’s own.

“This is probably the best soup I’ve ever had,” Gilbert commented, taking the entire bowl in one gulp.

“He made the entire dinner,” another servant added, which didn’t help Feliciano’s predicament.

He didn’t say anything, he didn’t even look at them, he simply continued on with his food like he normally did, and the rest began to do the same, but they could not hold the moans of delight that escaped them as they kept on.

This was just the soup, Feliciano couldn't imagine them once they had the two main plates.

No soup bowl was left empty, and as the other plates began coming, their minds exploded with new taste. Silence reigned because all were too busy savoring every bite they took, and every single plate was taken back to the kitchen empty.

"I haven't dined like this in a while," Kiku said, content, even rubbing his belly proudly.

"As expected from an Italian," the Jack laughed, one that was contagious to Feliciano, who had to hide it by cleaning some of the tomato sauce that had managed on his lips from the pasta.

"I wouldn't mind having you cook again." In fact, Gilbert was kind of hoping to have seconds.

"As wonderful as this dinner was, please, don't let it be something that can commonly happen Feliciano," Louis simply said, quite calmed from her previous anger.

"I agree, but we thank you for it," and the King even bowed to him.

"What did you think, Ludwig?" Monika asked her son, who still laid with an unbelievable expression, his eyes lost, like they were submerged in an old memory and it was all he could see at the moment. Feliciano had a small idea of what, hands holding to his arm, nervous as to what he was to say now.

At his mother's words, he broke from his vision, met with the same Feliciano of his mind, but now different, now in his present before him. He coughed, he seemed to be working the words in his mind, sitting straight as he uttered them like he had trained them in his mind several times. "Everything was…delicious. I could easily taste your touch in it, which made it the more exquisite."

And for once Ludwig said something that actually made his heart soar, that made him smile, a beautiful smile that even made the arising King blush, quickly hiding his face from his future Queen, now embarrassed.

"Thank you, your highness. Thank you all."

Feliciano had gone up to his room gleeful, for once feeling comfortable in his room, now after taking a nice wash and all his trunks empty into their cabinets and wardrobes, giving more space to the room (surely work of the servants while he was away). He was preparing his bed, the melody of his little trunk aiding him in a hum. He quickly turned it off at the entrance of the arising King. Feliciano stared up to him, not knowing if to give him a smile, say a word, confidence in him after the compliment he had given him for his dinner.

He wasn't quick enough. Ludwig turned, began undressing and the preparation in his own bed, with the same scowl and indifference, like Feliciano was just another wall decoration in the room.

He should have expected it and he shouldn't have held such high hopes. He sighed and sat in his bed, hiding his little trunk in a box under the bed, sitting back up, nervous, fidgeting, listening intently to the rustling Ludwig made as he prepared himself for his sleep.

He didn't know what brought him to say this, but his child side just continued to feel the hurt and it needed to voice it. "You were with me when mama taught me all those recipes," he pierced the silence with yet a whispering voice, but enough for Ludwig to hear, who instantly stilled his movements. "We made them together, and we kept on perfecting until I could make it myself for you…" he didn't say no more, his fingers intertwining themselves as he tried to relax, taking breaths to continue speaking, surprisingly still holding Ludwig's attention. "I promised you this, I promised I would continue to improve and make you dinner, and…you promised the same."

He awaited an answer, any words, disagreement or approval from Ludwig, but he only remained still, holding to his blanket, clearly unsure, as if hoping his very silence could speak to Feliciano.

He opened his mouth, breathing loud, and no matter how long it took him, Feliciano was willing to hear, turning and their eyes meeting for his answer.

"I did," he only said, turning away, immediately taking his bed, making himself comfortable, and turning over to the other side as he had accustomed to doing ever since Feliciano came back.

And that was all the arising Queen was going to see, that was all he was going to hear and it was a sign that he should just go to sleep, hurt as he was and try to rest. And so he did, with the same heartfelt hurt of the first nights of the castle.

Chapter End Notes

EDITED: On 25.10.2024

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

> Took me long enough…and I'm sorry about that :'D Uni has been extremely harsh and I find rarely time to write. My next update will be slower again, but let's see how it goes. I hope you enjoy this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After the very small words they shared the night before, Ludwig hadn't been insisting on waking him up that morning. He did his routine in silence and left like his trace had never been in the room. It meant more for Feliciano to sleep, as well as a chance to wake up energized, giddy, ready to take on the day head on with wondrous smiles, twirls and have his arms and legs expand in every direction. Like he was part of a trained ballet, he skipped off the bed and began with the rhythm of a routine he had gotten in the last mornings and the picking of his clothes. Once he was pristine and clean as his new set of clothes for the day, he marched proudly to the door with chest held high, opening them with the very force he had saved and earned from the night. The moment he was met with the halls, and the angry judging gaze of the queen, it had all fallen into pieces and whatever song he had playing in his mind just stopped all completely.

He didn't understand why she was already so angry this morning, but one look to what he wore and he instantly understood.

He wore simplistic attire just like the one he had worn the day before, the very same one he momentarily forgot the queen detested and she would rather not have him in if he was to stand next to her for much of the day. With a groan, Feliciano had no choice than to return back inside and go with something completely new.

He chose one that the castle had to offer. It was made with knowledge of his measurements and thus it fit perfectly, but it was still too tight, too ornamental, a magenta that he detested and not a space for air to enter, and thus only bringing him but heat for these summer days. Still, it was what the Queen wanted, what made her smile and earned him a great nod of approval, despite the clear irritation on his face.

At last, they could head off, and the sooner they finished the sooner- "Where's your schedule and notebook?"

Feliciano rolled his eyes as he returned to his room to get them.

Every hall in the castle was busier than Feliciano would have expected. More servants and maids than usual only to offer the needed decorations, menus and arrangements that were for

days further than their own.

Back home, Feliciano's family didn't get worried for their coming feasts until the day before. He found it rather unnecessary to start things so early. A lot could change in the meantime. What if the items weren't available? What if they saw something else they preferred in the coming weeks? But the Queen didn't listen to Feliciano's stuttering every time he tried to interrupt her, shushing him with a hold of her hand and going on with making her usual choices (Even if she was insisting with telling the servants that it was by Feliciano's wishes).

"Dark red wine curtains," she told a group of servants, who were off quick to find the specific color for both the Queens to see.

"Curtains?" Feliciano asked as he wrote it down on the ever growing list on his notebook.

"For the windows of the ball of course."

"You actually put on curtains?"

"For elegancy."

It seemed so odd when they could depend on the lunar light to bring life to the coming party. Putting curtains seemed like Louis wanted to drown the ball room into darkness, not giving a chance for the party to witness the beautiful skies and outer gardens of the castle. Then again, his mind still though on about the stellar theme.

"Your majesties, for the forks that will be used," a maid interrupted to present two sets of forks, an expensive silver and to Feliciano…both looking exactly the same.

"Uh…" it was hard for him to decide.

"The Donelli will make an excellent touch," the Queen easily made her choice and the maid left quickly.

Feliciano made a note to learn the differences between forks and their names.

They continued down the halls, new ones with paintings Feliciano had not acknowledged before. If it wasn't for the quick pace the Queen had and her insisting of having him always by her side, Feliciano would have stopped to admire them. Those colors, those forms, mending well with the fine structures of pillars and semi-circles. How could they just move pass them without any acknowledgement? Servants and maids still kept coming with the same indifference to their surroundings, holding distinct items for them to choose their preferred color, practically the same to Feliciano. He had no idea how Louis could tell the difference. It stalled much of their walking, but after several minutes, they had reached their goal.

Louis opened the large doors with the ease her very grandson possessed, quite excited to show the ball room to Feliciano. She gave space to let him enter first, and he took the chance.

It was indeed large, larger than he had expected, with a ceiling so high he knew he wouldn't reach even with flight spells at his command. He spun, walked further, hoping to reach an

end that seemed impossible the further his eyes went. It was magnificent, properly decorated with several paintings of their history, recognizing one of his ancestor, Romulus. It was the he biggest of all, in his armor and horse, leading the army that was to vanquish Khaos. Others showed different scenes and different rulers, some extending and reaching to the sides, stories separated by pristine white pillars. Sadly some were covered with expensive vases, flowers, or other items the royals saw fit to decorate the room even in the absence of a feast. Indeed, it was spectacular, and already Feliciano could imagine himself twirling in different dances for the countless of balls he would surely attend. He couldn't help himself and tried out some of the steps and spins he knew, imagining a song in his head.

"Leave the dancing for your lessons, Feliciano," Louis scolded as she moved to reach him, servants and maids catching up and moving behind her.

"Lessons?" He wondered.

"That is of no importance right now. What do you think of the ballroom?" She was as proud as if she had designed it all.

"È bellissimo!" He honestly told her, the wonderment shown in his eyes.

"Thought it would be appropriate to show you so you could understand why it was best."

To be honest, Feliciano still wished for the crystal dome ball room, but this one looked much wonderful than the drawing he had seen in the maps. He wouldn't mind having the ball here at all.

"Was that really all?"

"No." That's when the maids behind her showed different shades of the same brown to the both of them. "We have to choose the tablecloth and where we're going to place the tables."

Feliciano couldn't contain the groan that escaped.

Feliciano joined Queen Louis in her lunch, sitting well by a balcony from a middle floor that gave an excellent view to the gardens of the castle. They had made him an excellent Linguini with garlic oil and pancetta. Surely the cooks followed one of the recipes he had made for them the night before. They learned, and it tasted delicious. It was an excellent addition of taste to the beauty his eyes beheld as he gazed on finding new fountains, statues and hidden groves in different corners of the garden. He really wanted to have the chance to loose himself when he could.

Louis looked perfectly content with her bratkartoffeln, although many times she stole gazes to Feliciano's own plate, salivating for a taste, but her pride didn't let her ask for a bite.

Her plate was soon empty, which meant it was time to go back to work. She took a proper sitting position, elbows on the table, hands taking hold of her chin, the sign for the maids to

come, pick up the plates and leave a stack of menus. This quickly took Feliciano's attention from the garden. He picked the first one up, offering a list of small snacks and appetizers.

"What is this?"

"Did you think we'd forgot about the food?"

Ah yes, it was for the ball, how intriguing.

When it came to food he knew just what to do and for once he hoped, Louis knowing Feliciano was from Italy and the dinner he had made the night before, she'll put utter trust in him to make this decision. He looked gleefully through the pages, but none took his interest, none seemed appetizing, or even good. If any of this would be offered in any party he would plainly ignore them, even if it meant he'd had to go hungry. He checked two other booklets, and still the same disinterest. He gave up on checking the rest, an idea forming in his head, slightly afraid of what Louis would tell him if he asked.

"I wouldn't mind making something myself for the ball," he suggested, which instantly earned a glare from the Queen, stressful eyes marking it clear on her face.

"The arising queen, spending his own welcoming ball in rags working in the kitchen? I rather lead our kingdom to war with Clubs than have our people witness something like that."

"I'll make new recipes and leave them in the kitchen for the cooks to make."

"No, it would be too much work. Besides, our people have been used to them and only know these recipes, such changes would not be fitting. It's better to leave things as they've always had, it won't leave room for surprises or unexpected mishaps," she was sure and she took a drink from the tea a maid had brought her, an anger still imminent in her that Feliciano knew he shouldn't mess by saying more to try and convince her. Louis simply took the menus and made the decision for herself, as always, giving her list to a maid who set off to officiate the papers so the cooks could be prepared weeks in advance.

Feliciano didn't understand this. Back in his home, his mother would serve desserts she would make up only an hour before the feast, Augusto would sometimes change sauces in the middle of cooking simply because he changed his mind, and Lovino usually added new spices to the food just as they were served. It was a custom he adopted himself as he helped his family with the usual cooking for feasts or for their own. Having such order felt like the cooks' creativity was being lessened and only adding to the dullness of repeating taste that would lessen the experience of the ball. But as always, he remained shut, hiding any anger and disappointment, and following her throughout the rest of the day, making small preparations that only served in the background.

The next morning had been much like the last one. Feliciano had awakened to see the bed next to him empty, Ludwig already off dealing with some prisoners from Spades as he had mentioned at dinner last night. He was changing to something worthy of queen Louis's eyes when he received a knock at the door.

“Your highness, I was given instructions to report that the queen will be awaiting for you at the carriage. You will both be visiting the city today.”

How wonderful that sounded, what a chance, what relief to freedom he felt to leave the castle and meet the surrounding area he still had not the chance to.

“I’ll be down immediately,” he told her, joy evident in his voice that made the maid herself smile.

Dressed gorgeously in a white jacket, vest, and pants, with red sewn designs in them, Louis admired him as she waited in the shadow of the carriage. The horses and the coachmen were ready, and even the gates of the castle began to open knowing their soon departure. Not wanting them to wait any longer, Feliciano rushed over and took his seat in front of the Queen, greeting with his usual bowing.

Quickly the carriage moved, making its turn around the front rotunda and heading out down the main road of the city. Louis could tell Feliciano was ecstatic about this, for he couldn’t keep his eyes off the window, taking in everything from small statues in forgotten corners, to the colors and largeness of the buildings that continued going higher to compete with the height of the castle. Through populated and lively streets they drove until reached a more residential area, filled with houses that seemed to spill riches as well as ones that seemed more humble and simple. It was a lovely area, one surrounded by the greens and reds of their nature, magnificent art of sculptures, mosaics on the floor, as well as a group of children painting over one of the sidewalks. He was curious as to what they were, and as their coach came to a stop, the first thing he wanted to do when he headed out was get closer and see indeed what it could be.

“Come, Feliciano,” Louis commanded, coming down and making her way inside to one of the large houses.

Guards bowed at their welcome and Feliciano waved and smiled to them, which got the guards to flush. No one had acknowledged them in such a way. Servants and maids pointed along to the halls they were to take, all until they reached a terrace where an elder lady sat having some tea and snacks. She stood and bowed to their presence and for the first time Feliciano actually questioned what they were doing here and what had been the purpose of their trip. He noticed a stack of envelopes in the queen’s hand, decorated and probably made in the richest paper, tied by a beautiful pink string that topped its importance.

The lady pointed to the empty chairs and both had taken them, Feliciano rather shyly for he was in the presence of a respectful woman he had never met, in her house even, while the Queen was rather confident, smiling at the woman as any would to a dear friend. They began to speak, worthless conversation that paid no mind to Feliciano, and so he focused his attention to the surrounding flowers that decorated the terrace, all beautiful with colors that made him know that they were all well taken care of daily. A wall separated the garden to the outside, where Feliciano swore he could hear the laughter and conversations from the children who were painting. He felt like he would climb over without noticing and join them, forgetting his unknown duty and finally let his hands touch a brush and let them create whatever majesty his mind felt like constructing.

“-this must be Feliciano Valenti,” the woman acknowledged, with a kind smile and surely grateful to be in his presence.

Out of kindness, Feliciano smiled back to her, watching as then Queen Louis handed her one of the many envelopes in her hand.

“A ball I suppose,” she instantly knew.

“Yes, for Feliciano’s welcome into the city, all arranged by himself and we would kindly require your presence.”

Those were invitations then…did they really have to go around handing the invitations themselves? It seemed like an awful lot of work and Feliciano did not like the idea of wasting a day in the city to just hand in invitations to aristocrats.

The elder woman seemed to have noticed his downward gaze, the disappointment and begging for something to do. She knew this was still Feliciano’s first days in the city, and if the queen didn’t mind: “I’m honored to be invited, thank you so much, and may I ask, your majesty, have you given the young arising queen the chance to visit the city.”

Quite embarrassingly she had to admit that the chance had not appeared with their busy schedule inside the castle. His only real chances to see the city were in his very arrival and that morning they headed out meaning to hand in invitations to the guests Louis had already decided on.

“Please give him a chance, it’s always grand to have a queen be with his or her people, it let’s them get to know the real problems and truly what their citizens need,” she said kindly, not wanting to make the Queen feel bad but give a wonderful opportunity to Feliciano, and he really appreciated it.

“When it’s available,” she told her lastly before she stood.

They wished their farewells and headed back out to the carriage that was awaiting them along with the joyful shouts of the children as they continued with their ground painting. Louis could see the wanting in Feliciano’s eyes to join them, his hands begin for a touch of wet paint, any type of canvas to trace and let it come alive from its original blank state. Having Feliciano continuing to hand in invitations in prestige and stuffy mansions like they had just visited really felt like she was caging a beautiful bird.

“Why don’t you stay here while I hand in the rest of the invitations, but only here,” she pointed directly to the small square, where other than the children, people passed to admire the beautiful mansions, the trees and blooming flowers. “I’ll come back for you once I’m done, all right?”

Feliciano bounced, and he could have hugged her if she hadn’t rushed already to the house next door, leaving him with a wonderful chance of freedom that was too much for the moment.

Should he really waste it watching children paint? He could run along the square and street, talk to anyone, ignore his proper conduct as an arising queen and be who he wanted. But painting, colors, the giggling of children dragged him forward like a casted spell.

He wasn't so forward, slow, step by step, as he did not want to interrupt the children's concentration and spilling of imagination.

They were around seven, all working together on a single piece of a sort of feast where all their characters danced. All kinds of couples were presented, from those of children, adult and old, same or different sexes, and from all parts of the world. It was coming out lovely, with wonderful shades of purples, magentas, reds and added yellow sparkles to truly give it a glow. He was so intrigued, he didn't notice as he came close enough as to cover one of the boy's drawings with his shadow.

The boy looked up and stopped all completely in his shyness, covering the chalk as if trying to hide proof of what he had made. The rest did the same, hiding their own, thinking Feliciano was there to scold them.

"What kind of music do you think they're playing?" Feliciano asked in German, as kindly as he could without meaning to scare them.

It worked, for he noticed the children fall at ease, revealing their different colored chalks as they looked among themselves trying to decide on a song.

"A song to the heights," one kid decided.

"By Caterina Hellewege," another added to show that they knew about music, fearing an insult as they were accustomed by so many adults.

"Perfect," Feliciano said, kneeling down to take in the details more precisely. "I've never seen a more happier crowd. It is absolutely stunning," he told them, which got them all to smile proudly, giggling once again and making them love their work much more.

"I want to dive and join them in a dance," he admitted, loving the details they gave to many of the dresses and suits, a hand even tracing two male King and Queen they had drawn. The Hearts arising King and Queen he could tell. One looked a lot like Ludwig, while the other was simply the kids trying to draw himself from what they had heard. They had painted his hair much curlier and longer than it was, in deep red that looked like the national color instead of his actual brunette. It was enough proof for Feliciano to realize that they didn't know who he was and he had no problem with forgetting it and making himself a child once more, pushing aside the idea that already children were looking up to Ludwig and him as a power couple of the kingdom like those of generations passed.

"May I?" He raised his hand, hoping that they would offer any piece of chalk.

Having liked his compliments and wanting to see what he could do himself, they gave him three pieces of chalk, all in different colors. Perfect.

They went back to what they were doing and Feliciano joined by adding his own uniquely styled figures. He didn't want to make something too glamorous as to not make the children's own drawings look poor, but something to add to the beauty they had already created. He met them, he learned from them, they laughed, they even sang old nursery rhymes and played some simple chalk games that had caught the attention of the passerbies who stopped to watch, join, and make wondrous comments about how the drawing was coming along. Feliciano was having a wonderful time, making friends and speaking freely to his people, who were all kind and eager for any interesting topic of conversation Feliciano held out. He wouldn't mind spending the rest of the day like this, returning to the castle as he wished just as he had done back in his home village. But it couldn't, his position and reality would come back to him, just as Queen Louis did.

When everybody noticed her, silence befall as easily as rain or snow would, held positions and expressions as they all bowed in unison and some of the children even went off to join their parent's side.

"Feliciano," she called, making her way clear towards him.

"Feliciano?" Many began to question, suddenly then understanding who he was and who they had just spoken to. They quivered just as they did for the queen, standing away to give them both space, never stopping their bowing.

"Come, I had given most of the invitations. The messengers can send the rest to those who live further from the castle and outside the city." She pointed to the coach, the coachman holding the door open, waiting patiently for them.

Feliciano was hesitant, in his mind finding a well enough excuse to stay, but he knew none of that could work, so he opted with requesting something else. "Do you still have some extra invitations?"

She perked curiously, "They're all accounted for, I have already given a list."

"But can you please add more. There are some people I would love to see."

Those around him seemed to light up with the prospect, standing from their bowing and whispering among themselves joyfully.

"Who are these exactly?" She asked, crossing arms, an angry look in her face that made Feliciano rather hesitant to continue.

"These children I befriended and their families. I would love to spend more time with them and I figured the ball would be an excellent chance."

Silence settled as she gazed to these children, and their families which held them, smiling and waving to the queen rather shyly. Queen Louis could easily tell their standing by merely watching, belittling them with her stare, which made them all bow once again, all trace of excitement erased.

“I cannot allow that Feliciano. These citizens are merely commoners. Such presence should not be allowed in the castle.”

Feliciano felt insulted for them. “But they’re citizens of the city and kingdom like any other,” he defended.

“Yes, but their social standing does not make them worthy enough of the riches they cannot afford of the castle. They’ll have nothing to wear and surely won’t act with the proper conduct."

“That shouldn’t matter, what matters is they enjoy themselves and spend time with the royals. You said yourself that a ball is a chance to meet with our people, no matter who they are.”

But the queen was not having it. Her voice became hardened, raising her hand as if to stop him from saying anything else or blocking the very words he uttered from continuing to convince her. “When I said that, I meant people of power that we can use for their connections in trade, military help and wealth. We shouldn’t be wasting our time with those that could not offer anything. Now come along, we still have other plans in the castle.” She turned and left before he could say anything else, not a look to the crowd, and headed over to her coach ready to leave without a care of the hurt she created.

Feliciano was still, as hurt as his people, not sure what he could do to alleviate or what he could say. He turned to them, clearly as desolated, for once wishing he was more commanding as he should be being the arising queen of Hearts. He bowed, muttered a heartfelt apology and left back to the coach. As he did, one of the little girls he had been drawing with tried to run for him, but her mother held a tight grip on her wrist. She still reached out, hoping to get him back, tears and whimpers aiding along in her want.

It hurt that Feliciano couldn’t do anything about it, that he couldn’t even look at her and pretend as it was nothing because the queen maintained a watchful and angry stare on him. He sat straight on his seat, his eyes grounded on the floor of the coach, trying to ignore how this all maddened him, how the queen was being unfair and thinking about how he was really starting to dislike this ball.

Chapter End Notes

EDITED: On 25.10.2024

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

I love it when I update in just a week. I wish it could always be like this. But until this semester finishes I cannot ; ~;

I consider this chapter to be rather short. I was going to add more but I decided it was best to leave what I had in mind for the beginning of another chapter. I hope you all enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It only turned more hectic.

Over the week that passed, Feliciano was not given any calm and not just in matters of the ball. Queen Louis was insisting that Feliciano should also have a vast and exact knowledge of the history of the kingdom, and thus kept questioning him, extensively, even in dinner or breaks where they sat while Feliciano helped her with some documents. His etiquette in dinner and with others began to be tested, scolded harshly for a word, spoon, or movement out of place. He still kept on (or more precisely, queen Louis) making choices for the ball, seeming never ending and in a way Feliciano was starting to understand why it was that they started their preparations so early. Then again, they expected the Queens to make every decision, down to even what kind of toilet paper and soaps should the bathrooms have.

In the days that had passed in his stay, Feliciano realized that the castle had an aim for utter perfection that he found too obsessive, constraining and chocking.

How could the inhabitants of the castle live like that? It was becoming too hard and harsh for Feliciano, and this one specific day his patience had finally blown up and drowned him in an incredible sorrow that made him wish he could take a carriage back to his home, forget about being arising queen and pray to the gods that they chose somebody else.

Queen Louis had insisted that he took dance classes. Not that Feliciano didn't dance, but Louis had watched him grow and knew well that Feliciano's style was clearly from the Italian province. It was festive, it was moving, hands clapping, smiles, shouts and quickened enough to spread the liveliness well throughout the crowds. But he was in Germany now and that wouldn't do anymore. The dances common in their balls was the waltz and it was important that Feliciano knew it well for then, as also hoping to calm him enough to not break into flourish twirls and jumps as he had already done as the practices began.

He had been in the ballroom, testing a simple walk, with a maid who was chosen to be his partner. While one hand held hers as he did the proper movements and twirls, his other hand held an open book which he tried to read at the very same time.

“Calm your shoulders, your highness,” his instructor called.

Feliciano had to look away from his book as he brought that calm and focused on making the right foot movements.

“Feliciano, where did King Lorena tame the dragon Drialgen?” The Queen asked from a corner, scratching down some things in a list she held.

“Uh…” that was just the part he was getting into in the book. “The cave of Hudy,” he answered, loud enough to hear, quickened as a maid came close offering a list with chairs to place in the halls.

“Batter or Dandelions?” She showed two themes that looked too identical to Feliciano.

“Um…dandelions.”

“No! Batter!” Of course.

“Attention to your feet!” His instructor called.

Feliciano looked down to notice he had missed several of the steps, even tangling himself with his partner to the point that they almost fell. Luckily she took a good hold on him, right to the direction of a servant with a list, who was hoping Feliciano could address a situation with a wrong sitting.

“Uh…uh…uh…” he tried deciding as he moved along with his partner, the servant joining like he was part of their routine.

“Feliciano, read on about King Lorena and Queen Bailey, I’ll be asking you about their immigration treaties.”

Feliciano despised how calmed she looked having her drinks and snacks.

He tried, swaying along with the book, always losing the line he was in and having to start certain paragraphs all over again. He chose the new sitting on a whim, randomly picking as he maintained his eyes on the book.

“A twirl, your highness,” the instructor called.

As he did, a servant showed him two panels of glasses, overhearing the queen say: “This seating is too wrong. Go over to Feliciano and tell him to do it all over again.” That servant quickly came back, just as another maid was coming asking for the exact order the music was to be played.

“Feliciano, which of King Lorena and Queen Bailey’s three children was chosen to be the next Queen?”

“Uh…I don’t know!” He shouted, for he was nowhere near that part in the book.

“Your majesty, you have to decide what colors we will use for the fountain lighting!”

“I don’t know!”

“Your majesty, we don’t think we can bring an organ!”

“Then…then…” he was starting to shake, sweat began for the heat was starting to reach him and he was breathless as he tried to pick one thing he could decide for now. But everyone was on him, many new were coming with different questions, different remarks, adding and adding until Feliciano swore he was swarmed all around.

He began moving away, losing sight of his partner, of the ceiling, even the floor. A single miss of a step and he fell down, crashing along with a table and a decorative vase. It was what was needed to finally bring the room into settled silence, as they all cringed at the breaking and let it continue until it was done.

Feliciano’s vision relaxed and he could finally notice what had happened.

He realized he looked like an utter fool surrounded by countless broken pieces of the items that were on the table, as well as those from the vase. The tablecloth lay over him, different pieces stuck to his jacket which even managed a tear. He had several wet patches from the water the vase held and he lay in an awkward position that had him too open and unrefined for a person who was dressed as he was. The servants and maids hesitantly came closer, not sure whether to offer help or continue on with their pestering questions.

The queen instead came forward, between the mass of people that stared on to the arising queen. She stood before him, arms crossed with a chastising glare, belittling him for doing such a small thing as to simply trip accidentally and ruining the continuous order of the items they were fulfilling.

“You look like a mess,” she said. "Clean up and get back to business.”

She began to turn, not even offering help, the instructor, servants and maids, just about ready to jump on him now that the Queen gave them space. No one bothered still to even help him up or acknowledge the mess.

“No,” Feliciano said simply, which was enough to hold them all up before they continued.

It held the queen completely from walking on, as if the single statement was a new word she had never heard.

“What?” She asked.

Feliciano displayed a glare to impact with the very queen’s, as fearful to the servants, who began to move away as Feliciano stood on his own, since no one was offering their help. He brushed himself off, with a serenity in his face like he had just woken up from a nice nap.

“Your majesty…” one servant was about to begin, but Feliciano simply raised his hand. He was not going to put up with this.

“I’ll be off.”

He moved past all of them, ignoring their stares and even striding past the queen out the ballroom, closing the large doors with a loud crash that it seemed to have made the entire ballroom shake.

All stood motionless, their eyes still on the door examining what had just happened.

The queen didn't do anything but scoff, "how weak."

The only solace he could find was in his room, which luckily held no presence of the arising king. He had heard something about him visiting some sick to study certain diseases. Good, he could breath, shutting himself well, even closing the curtains from the bright sun that didn't help to clean the tears that began to coat his face.

He didn't want it to affect him like this, he wanted to be strong, he just wanted to take a nice siesta, have a nice drink and go back to the same turmoil.

Truth was he didn't want to.

He embarrassed himself, he showed he couldn't deal with the force, the command and even went against the Queen by simply leaving. It worsened the coming of tears, gripping hard on the curtains as he tried to hold himself, but the failing was clear and it repeated all throughout his mind, a reminder that he couldn't do it, that he wasn't supposed to be here, he didn't deserve this power, he didn't deserve this position, the gods were wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong. He couldn't hold the weeping, the continuous stream of tears, falling down to his bed defeated, his sobbing on his blankets and pillows, drowning in his own sea of emotions and feelings of wrongness.

Minutes and hours passed, yet he remained in the same, continuing to bawl even in his rest, for his dream only repeated the scenes of what had happened.

He had awakened much later with a knock at the door. He groaned, praying to the Aces it wouldn't be a servant, or worst, Ludwig. He did not feel like showing himself as he was. A mess, his face reddened with dry and continuing tears.

"Wha-what is it?" He called.

"Feliciano…" he realized it was Kiku, trying to find the gentlest tone. "…I heard what happened. May I come in?"

He tried to fix himself somehow, but it was useless. "Yes," he answered and Kiku made his entrance, as light as he always was, his presence quite relaxing to Feliciano.

He took a gentle seat on his bed beside him, so faint that Feliciano didn't even feel him. He only offered silence, gazing to him, signifying that he was there to listen to him.

"Why did you come?" Felicianio asked, not meaning to sound mean or maddened still.

“To be honest, our power instructor was asking about you. You haven’t been coming to training,” he started.

Feliciano groaned loudly, bringing his hands to his face, feeling a new course of tears wanting to come.

“Also, some servants had been telling me about your planning for the ball with the queen, and I really…wanted to see if you were okay.”

Feliciano couldn’t contain himself, biting his lips, sobbing, raising his hands to slam them hard against the bed, startling the other. “It’s done nothing but show me that the queen that I used to look up to and admire has been cruel, oppressive, strict and ignorant,” he began, his voice agitated, a maddening tone that Kiku never though Feliciano could possess. “She has ordered me around to be her exact copy, leaving me not a chance to do a thing of my own, yet still as insisting I do the job as it is. It’s done nothing but drive me insane. If she’s being like this for a single ball, I cannot imagine for when we go to my other teachings.” He stood, pacing the room with angry steps against the marble.

He suddenly stopped, grabbing and pulling on his hair, thinking back to the times when he was afraid to come here, the very reasons happening before him.

“It’s shown me more than ever that I was not fit for this." He headed over to his wardrobe.

“Feliciano, it was made clear that the gods chose you. You had the mark of rebirth.”

“Not anymore."

“It’s normal for it to disappear after your first year.”

But it didn’t make a difference, for Feliciano took out one of his trunks, deciding on the items of most importance he could take with him.

“Feliciano, what are you doing?” Kiku peeked to figure out.

“I’m going to run away,” he said with outmost ease.

“You can’t do that!” Kiku stood and closed the wardrobe, standing before him so he wouldn’t dare continue. “It is a natural selected decision. Any change can cause ultimate unbalance,” Kiku tried to convince him.

“They were wrong in their choice! They probably just chose me because of my Romulus lineage. How could they expect some countryside boy from who knows where in Italy to govern an entire Kingdom with heavy set German laws and customs? Something just went wrong, they’ll realize their mistake and choose anew someone who the arising King will better stand looking at than myself." It hurt to admit it, another tear falling down, still trying to get Kiku to move out of the way. “I don’t belong here, I can’t be and won’t be like any of the past queens and everyone is just wasting their time,” he still tried to convince him.

They moved in front of the wardrobe, practically fighting as they tried to settle their dominance over the cabinets. In the process they had somehow tripped, and Kiku cornered

him down, not giving him a chance to move. He then moved to take his hand, stilling him as he held the specific finger that held the ring mark he was given by the gods when it was decided he would be engaged to Ludwig.

“Of course you can’t be like the past queens. Each one is their own!” He said loudly enough for Feliciano to still for now, quite fearful of the sudden command Kiku took. “You’ll be your own queen, Feliciano.”

Kiku finally gave him movement, making them sit together, facing to the other, Feliciano giving the full attention Kiku needed him in, still holding his finger with the mark.

"The Aces are always, always absolute in their choices. The only time they were wrong was with Khaos’ creation, but other than that, no other king, queen or jack has proven to be a failure. Yes, we might praise some more than others, but they all fulfilled their duty as they should by the Aces’ call. They never make mistakes with their choices. Even if it has to do with your Romulus line, then why didn’t they choose your grandfather, your mother, or even your brother? Whatever the reason, you were chosen Feliciano, and it would be very cowardly of you to run away from their decision when you’re just starting and still haven’t showed your potential. An Italian queen for the first time in centuries, Feliciano, you must be destined for something grand.”

Kiku slowly, very slowly, began to let go, giving the chance for Feliciano to accept the coming words into his mind. “With all respect to her majesty the queen, she has to learn that her reign is to be done and she should let a completely new queen take his own control. You can’t let yourself easily succumb to her. Yes, respect her, learn from her, but don’t let her decide and direct what you wish to do. You have to take command as the new coming queen and show her indeed that you are capable of it, much more than anyone in the castle thinks. You belong in the throne as the Aces decided, but you have to step up and really show it.”

He began to stand, leaving Feliciano sitting on the floor, who was too stunned from the words to really move.

Kiku made his way to leave, as prestige like he hadn’t just brawled on the floor.

“One last thing,” he turned as he left the door open about to head off. “Ludwig has to learn to stand as equal as you, and you have to see him the same way. As the Aces chose you both to be King and Queen, they also had a reason for your union. You both have to learn to depend on the other, just as the Kingdom does.” And he shut the door, leaving Feliciano again in the solitude and darkness.

Even in the shadows, Feliciano felt brightness, for the words caused a sense of renewal that awakened him. He realized then what a fool he had been, not because of what he had done in the ballroom, but because of the haste decision to just give it all up.

What a coward, what disrespect to the Aces, who he knew now well confided in him and was the reason they placed so much power in him. Power…yes, power. He clenched his fist and looked to them hopefully, finally realizing.

He recalled the words of his mother and grandfather, very similar to those of Kiku's. He though to Lovino and Antonio's own, his father's, his servants and maids, the people of his village all back in Italy. He thought of all those who believed in him, even to the King and Queen (no matter her sudden harshness with him), and perhaps even Ludwig. He was sure it was there...somehow. It didn't have to stop on those he knew, he though to the entire kingdom, who looked up to him expecting the very greatness of Romulus. How could he just throw it away like that and fail them. There was still so many chances he could give, changes he could create, and this was all just the beginning.

He finally stood, heading to the chest under his bed where he kept his musical box. He opened it and let the music begin, calming him as it always did, making him smile yet again, even grow confident, stand up strong and finally move the curtains accepting the beautiful setting sun over the city.

Tomorrow would be a new day, for a change that was constant as how the very sun and moon rose. He had that very power to change it all, and starting tomorrow, he was ready indeed to show that a new queen was in the castle.

Chapter End Notes

EDITED: On 26.10.2024

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hundreds of pairs danced in the meet of long thin metal, clashing all about like they were creating a melody, aided by their steps, their shouts, their groans or a cry of victory that interrupted the order from time to time. Their swords would sometimes glow with power, different elements or spells helping them in their attacks as they tried to fight off their foe. Their trainers were impressed with this magnificent feast of dueling, proper despite the savage calls and attacks.

One particular pair though, kept their attention on heights.

One of them had started their fencing training in the castle only days ago, yet he was confident on trying it out for he had practiced it back in his home. His past experience aided him well, and they admitted that he moved with the most finest out of all of them. He was smaller than his opponent, but his thin body gave him much more flexibility, legs well-toned, assisting in the force to thrust hard, even showing in the power he had learned to transport through his sword. Pink tinted rays followed the metal seeming to paint the air beautifully, but all knew that they burned as intensely as any fire that could be uttered with magic.

The instructors gazed on them, tension building for the battle heated like any in a battlefield, not expecting the ravaging from the man that lay under the mask.

They made sure that he used all three of the basic spells they had trained him in and were currently testing. First, the protected shield that defended, which he drew to buy himself time while he thought of his next move. Second, he extended, creating an attack that appeared as a glowing sphere from the very point of his sword. It could be anything the wielder wanted, but this one chose fire for the ease he could deal with the element. Third, and lastly, a slash of fire, which he used to burn the large string his opponent was holding, assuring his win and the end of their match.

The three instructors clapped, ecstatic about the results and what they had molded well this person to be in his skill. The Arising queen took off his mask, to show his gratitude for their well judgment in his smile.

“Spectacular, your highness,” one complimented, coming close. “You have well shown us your dominance with the basic steps. We must immediately start with the second part!” He proclaimed, ready to begin that instant.

“I would love to, Signore Egilhard, but I have other plans for today.” He began to remove and hand in his gears to one of the servants, who were to take them to storage. “We’ll start officially for my next day of training.”

“As you wish, your highness,” he bowed and decided to head off and help another one of his many students.

“Thank you for being my partner, Mauro, you did excellent.”

“Not nearly as much as you,” he flattered him. It earned a chuckle and even blush from the arising queen, whose attention was then taken by a woman who tapped on his shoulder.

“Your highness, I really wanted to thank you for inviting me to the ball, as well as offering a chance for my younger sister to come. She’s always wanted to come , and I’ve never been given the chance."

“You’ve served as a soldier well enough for the past six years. You should have been granted an opportunity long ago. I’ll be glad to see you as well as your sister. If you have any problems with getting something to wear, let me know, I’ll make you something myself if I have to.”

It earned a chuckle from her. “There’s no need! But thank you, thank you!” And she bowed before she headed off across the grounds, and it was time he headed off as well.

He went back to his room to change, a simple long white bloused shirt, a deep red vest with an insignia of the hearts symbol made into roses, rather simple red pants, simple black boots, just the way he liked it.

When he headed out the room, two maids awaited for him, holding two long lists and feathered pens in their hands. They bowed in greeting and Feliciano gave them a pleasant smile.

“Have you listed the Hubers?”

“Yes, all five of them,” one appointed to the list, both the maids following the arising queen as he made his way down the halls.

“The Martini?”

“Done!” The maid had rightfully checked.

“The Moggachs?”

“We’ll add them right now,” one maid went and wrote on the parchment, making it official.

They reached together the main entrance of the castle, where Feliciano left the maids to their usual work, promising to come back and work better on the list. There were still some people missing. With only a couple of invitations in the pockets of his suit, he waved to the guards at the gate, and they gave him outing, opening the gates only slightly to let his small figure head out, at his own feet across the city.

As he went on, taking the streets, the trains or even horse carriages as any other citizen would, he would greet everyone with ease, conversing or sometimes even joining them on strolls across marketplaces or parks. This particular day he made his way through one of the old streets, where in his visits the last few days he realized they served the best bread in the city, better than even the ones in the castle. It was a lovely place, with the humblest of people that tried to give the old buildings and cobblestone roads life with the countless of red and

pink flowers they grew. There was a beautiful fountains right at the very center of this little area, where he liked to sit down and have a nice lunch or snack, gladly speaking to those who came close to him wanting some sort of company. But today, despite how much he was tempted, he came on a specific duty, rushing down the street to the bakery he had become a loyal customer to.

The baker had just placed a new set of chocolate covered pretzels and Feliciano was distracted, licking his lips wishing for an instant bite.

“Ah, Feliciano! Guten Morgen!” The baker greeted to him, still a small bowing movement out of respect, despite how many times Feliciano insisted he didn’t.

“Guten Morgen, Herr Jamich,” he greeted himself, keeping his eyes away from the sweets.

“Here for a chocolate croissant?” He asked, already preparing a plate to give.

“Surprisingly no, I’m actually here to grant you a special invitation." And he presented the prestige envelope, which in itself shone like a rare diamond to the baker, who never expected to have such a chance for one the highest festivities in the city, perhaps even the entire kingdom.

“My, my…um…it’s quite an honor, your highness,” he bowed in his gratitude, accepting the envelope, smiling grandly towards it, wanting to jump all around the bakery in his delight.

“Aside from that, would you mind serving…perhaps…” he tried to find them in their display, spotting them then at the very center like the true masterpiece of the bakery. “Your fudge bars!”

“An honor! How many would you need?”

“As much as you think would be enough for the ball!”

“I’ll get to work on it immediately.” And he was glad to head over to the kitchen, where surely he had others workers to tell of the great news.

After that was done, Feliciano went ahead to invite a seamstress just down the street, some garden workers, who he insisted brought over some of their flowers for the castle, and any others who he had befriended the last few days or people he had forgotten in the days he dedicated to his power training.

He returned just in time for dinner, happily eating, ignoring the comments he got about his simple wear for the day, but he had learned not to care.

The next day, he had called the head maid who was in charge of much of the decorating up to one of the many study rooms, where Feliciano found some books he really wanted to show her.

“You want me to cancel all of the original decorating plans?” She asked with large concern. The ball was only three days from then.

“Yep, were making something completely new,” he decided, opening a book of only chandeliers, all of the ones under the castle’s possession. “I want to make a stellar theme for the party.”

“None of the things the Queen decided will fit."

“Which is why we’re starting all over again." He didn’t want to think about the job they’ll have to make, but look for the page where he specifically saw the chandelier he wanted. He immediately pointed to it when he did.

The maid gasped at the beauty. It was a rain of sparkles shinning like true stars, large enough to fill the entire ground ballroom. It was so simple that she knew the queen would never think about it, but it gave such a unique touch and she knew that it fitted perfectly with what Feliciano had in mind.

“Do you know where this is stored?” He asked, handing the book to her.

“I’ll have to look for it, I don’t think it’s been used for centuries, but I’m sure we’ll find it and have it on time.” Feliciano had confidence in her and he settled her off immediately to it, while he spoke with other servants about the new set of items to place.

He then spent what was left of the morning and throughout much of the early afternoon telling the cooks what they should be making for the ball. It was an extraordinary list that they confided well in and instantly went for the practice, getting the ingredients for the recipes and hoping Feliciano could make them two more dishes just in case. Feliciano had promised them so, heading to the halls with a large amount of books in his hand.

By the queen’s insisting, Feliciano had been learning about pirates and how to deal with them, studying between helping the maids with the ball and now having to make two new recipes for the cooks. He had his ways of dealing and he was confident. But what should he make as the two extra recipes? With the added piles of the book and his mind in tomatoes, pasta and mushrooms, he did not notice the things around, and because of that he crashed right into a large figure, this figure just large enough to continue to stand tall, the encounter more like a pinch to him.

“Oh, please excuse me!” Feliciano started, a red of embarrassment as he tried to sit and begin picking the papers and books. It wasn’t until the figure kneeled down to help that he noticed that it was Ludwig, his movements turning into a shake, terrified to look into those surely judging eyes.

“There is a sudden commotion in the castle,” Ludwig commented, reaching for the book that went the furthest.

“Uh, ye-yeah, just, um, fixing some things about the ball."

“Fixing? Oma told me everything was already decided.”

“Well…um…” of all the moments to want a conversation.

What could he tell him indeed? He would surely scold him for messing everything and he didn’t wish to deal with that guilt when he had been managing just well with the sudden changes to the entire ball, more so than Queen Louis's constrains.

“Adding and changing…some things,” he said, which held some partial truth (In reality he was changing everything).

Ludwig still looked unconvinced, but he didn’t seem as interested enough to keep asking and be given a true answer. Instead, as they stood and Ludwig handed him the things he picked up, his gaze was solidified on the cross necklace Feliciano always wore faithfully. He hadn’t noticed it before because of the heavy wear and colors the arising queen had been forced to wear in his first days. Now he saw it stand out perfectly over a simple white blouse. Feliciano was too preoccupied with organizing his books and avoiding his stare to notice it.

“You’re wearing the necklace I gave you,” he broke the sudden silence, with something Feliciano though he would never acknowledge, or he had simply forgotten about.

Feliciano took it in his hands, remembering that it was there, admiring the simplistic design. He was so used to the routine to put it on that he sometimes forgot he was wearing it.

“I-I, I am.” It was like he had confessed to a crime.

“Why?” Ludwig asked like he was commanding, demanding an immediate answer. It only drove Feliciano to become more fearful to give him a response.

“Isn’t it obvious?” He managed to start after he took his breaths that made him grow in the bravery to answer him. “Because you gave it to me,” was the simple answer.

Feliciano held it harder in his hand, as if it was the only thing keeping him in his confidence to continue to speak to Ludwig without becoming a mess. Ludwig kept this new intense gaze on him, in which no emotion could be read but only hardness like a rock. The longer he remained as he was, the more hurt was brought to Feliciano, who didn’t know how he could stare into those eyes with calm. Those eyes that used to hold such endearment for him, now cold and unforgiving, moving him aside, ready to go with his usual work for today, to forget the encounter or even the importance Feliciano held for him by just wearing that necklace.

Before leaving, he suddenly stood, his thoughts revolving about something, Feliciano didn’t know what, but did he just…smirk? Feliciano noticed it faintly, just in time before Ludwig continued down the hall, with a proud stride unlike any he had ever seen in him.

What was that? It all seemed pretty odd, but he had a feeling it had to do with the necklace which he still held in his hand.

There had always been this sort of reaction to it that Feliciano never knew how to place. Both his parents were embarrassed to talk about it. When his brother found out he began to wear it, he scoffed and was maddened, while Antonio could only smirk. His grandfather, as well as the rest around him, were proud of…whatever decision Feliciano had made when he decided

to adorn it. It was truly the first time he actually stopped to think about what this necklace really meant and he promised to find out just before the ball.

There was only one day left and because so, the castle had been rather hectic with the sudden preparations that Feliciano had changed anew. Unlike past queens, Feliciano was running along them in the halls, making some last decisions as well as helping with whatever they needed. He had been in the dining hall, placing bowls, plates and silverware along with a single maid. He had taken the right side while she took the left, going along by one seat to the other.

They had conversed earlier, Feliciano learning that she had been married in the past to a trader from the Diamond kingdom. They had separated long ago, but she had bared him a daughter who was at the moment continuing her father's trade business. She was elder, surely by her forties or early fifties, and knew well of both the Diamond and Hearts Kingdom, so Feliciano confided in her to know.

"Signora Scali, do necklaces have specific meanings in the German province?" He suddenly asked, for silence had settled as they worked on.

"That depends on the kind and who gave it to you. Why do you wish to know?" She answered, not really looking at him, she was still busy ordering things.

While Feliciano though on to how exactly he was going to ask her, Signora Scali raised her eyes to the specific necklace he was wearing to better understand. She instantly knew and it was something that Feliciano should as well. It slightly frightened her that he was asking.

"The cross of promise," she uttered its name, but Feliciano's eyes didn't illuminate with understanding, he was just as lost, probably not knowing that she was talking about the very one wrapped around his neck. She pointed to it and finally he held it in understanding.

"The cross of promise?" He finally had a name. "What does it mean?"

She was stunned and she trembled not knowing how she could tell him. How could he just wear it without knowing? Without asking. Why didn't anybody tell him? And should she? She was a mere maid. Such news should not be in her duty to tell him. But his eyes begged for an answer and Signora Scali could not leave him in that doubt much longer.

"Your highness, the cross of promise, as its name, shows a promise of chastity to the person who gave it to you," she answered, hoping it would be just enough, but Feliciano still showed great confusion.

She needed to be clearer and she internally groaned.

"By wearing that necklace, you're promising the arising king, Prince Ludwig, that you will give up your virginity to him and only him on the night of your wedding, which is when the cross will change color and you may finally stop wearing it if you wish."

It was clear enough, for Feliciano stood stunned, with a hard red blush that seemed to even reach the widening of his eyes, close from dropping the plates he held in his hands. She had to come close to him just in case. She took the ones left in his hands and placed them on while Feliciano though about it, but Signora Scali couldn't understand if it was in either fear or anger. She was done and Feliciano still remained as paralyzed, now holding the necklace, the maid afraid that he would tug it down harshly enough to break.

"Your highness, I don't know much about engagements and consummations to the royals, but if I understand correctly, you have been intended for Ludwig by the Aces since you were ten years old. I thought you already knew that your only pair for intercourse would be the prince, otherwise it would be rather dishonorable."

She was right, it just came as a shock that Ludwig would already bound him in such a way, and without even leaving a note of what it meant.

Part of him knew that it would happen. In his sexual awakening, when he first learned to pleasure himself, he would imagine a grown and loving Ludwig ready to ravage him in the most passionate of ways. He didn't mind it, he smiled when it happened, confident that it would come much easier with their establish friendship and hopefully growing romance. But now, all he could think about is how cold it would be, how surely Ludwig would just do it because it was plain simply a job and surely the kingdom would expect an heir. He imagined himself being pushed away that night, with no loving heat, embraces, kisses and everything that was beautiful about making love.

Surely Ludwig gifted him the necklace to already own him as property, a doll that he could indulge in whatever desire he might feel without a care if it would be to Feliciano's liking or not.

His first time would be intended for harshness and that necklace sealed it and if he dared go against it, he would quickly be labeled a whore or anything else of disrespect.

He hated it, hated, hated, hated it and wanted nothing more than to break it that instant and throw it at Ludwig's face even. But he was stuck with it, if he didn't want the angry glares of the people around him. He would remain wearing it as he had always done. He needed to calm, he needed to keep his mind back on the ball. It was tomorrow and he couldn't let this damage whatever mental strength he needed to make it come out as he wished.

He let himself be led by the maid elsewhere, proving that it wasn't going to bother him for now.

Chapter End Notes

EDITED: On 26.10.2024

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The night had arrived and Feliciano was currently preparing himself in his room. Ludwig had decided to change in his old room, which gave Feliciano much more space to move about and look at himself in the mirror proudly. He chose something loose, comfortable, simplistic, but just enough to make him stand out beautifully. It had something seductive about it, for his shoulders were free, his white blouse beginning to fall from the edge, large and long puffs as his sleeves, mended well with another red fabric and golden details that even reached to his red long vest. He made sure to adorn his center with loose golden necklaces, as well as a golden tight one just around his neck. His pants were tight, in red, white, and golden designs sewn into them, just like the ones his red boots held, a slight heal to them that created a nice tapping against the marble floor of his room. He turned and danced in front of the mirror, indeed admitting his own beauty. For a quick moment the image of how Ludwig would react to his wear passed through his mind. He needed to blow it away, but it didn't help when he decided on wearing the very perfumes he had gifted him long ago. They did create a powerful yet sweet smell that would have many craving for the closeness of his neck and free shoulders to them.

He though himself done, heading to his windows and pulling a curtain aside, watching as several carriages and coaches arrived with the guests. They were surely keeping the guards busy, yet all his people, from the richest to the poorest looked excited and joyful, all of them talking enthusiastically with each other.

He took a glimpse then to his little musical chest on his table, which he then opened to hear the relaxing melody. He would need it, for he didn't know how the queen, the king, the nobles, the rest of his citizens, and Ludwig would react to the changes he made. He had to be ready to face them.

With a last breath, and the closing of his chest, he stood and made his way down.

He was welcomed down with horns and even a crowd who apparently had been awaiting him.

"His highness, the arising queen of Hearts," one man called out loudly enough for all to hear, and applauses erupted, cheerful, with people bouncing and waving.

It was quite nice and it had Feliciano smiling, waving to them just as ecstatically, continuing to make his way down, for people to take better notice of what he was wearing. Whistles escaped and eyes grew, and it helped in his stride to come down to the crowd and welcome as many as he could.

“Feliciano, you’ve been to the ball room right?” He recognized the woman soldier, who came for her own greetings, holding a cup of wine, along with her sister beside her. They both looked wonderful.

“I was helping the servants prepare this morning.”

“Have you seen it alight though?”

“I just came downstairs,” he chuckled.

“Then you must come, your highness,” the younger sister pulled them both along in her giddiness, through the crowds that smiled or bowed to them along the halls, all making their way to the ballroom at the end.

The glow of the chandelier and of the other decorations they placed at the last minutes, of lights and white curtains pulled pack, felt like they were making their way into the night sky. Festive music reached their ears, Feliciano could spot the dancing that was just as alive, people laughing and twirling all around as one should in a real feast.

People parted for him and the ball was finally before him, a show of stars glowing. The night sky didn’t hold a single cloud, which almost felt like the ceiling was just another part of the starry sky. The chandelier, which they had luckily found and only had to clean slightly, made an excellent touch and was the true star of the ball. He knew instantly that people loved it, for some only stood pointing to them, dancing under them or sharing of the snacks the servants were already serving. Delightful they looked and Feliciano had to hold himself from taking a small seafood cup from a tray a servant held as he passed right by them. He heard continuous awes about everything, shared between nobles and commoners who spent their time together enjoying in conversation and ignoring their status.

It had been one of the things worrying Feliciano, and it brought a big smile to see aristocrats dancing with common workers, children of all kind running about, playing together, going through the dancing couples if they had to. The adults didn’t mind, for they were happy to know that their kids were enjoying themselves just as much as they were.

The dancing had been so active that a single area for it could not be possible. The music was just too good, upbeat and keeping all the guests animated. Feliciano was glad he had changed the music sheets from the boring ones Queen Louis had in her earlier plans. At least he kept some for when the waltzing started, mostly for the romantics who wanted something more calm.

For now, everything was wonderful, more beautiful than he could have expected, and he stared on proudly. He made this, truly made this to the image of his decision and everyone was having fun, uniting for they were all in the end from the same kingdom.

He felt like crying joyful tears.

They didn’t shed for he felt a sudden tap on his hip that took him away from his gazing, staring back to an all familiar little girl. It was the very girl from the chalk painting, the one who had cried when he had left with the Queen. It was such a wonder to see her now smile,

holding to him a single red rose, surely as a sort of gift for the chance to be invited to this wonderful feast.

“Paula, thank you so much, it’s beautiful!” He took it, placing a gentle kiss on her tiny little cheek, which had her giggling and blushing.

He placed the rose on his hair, and once it was secured, he quickly took the little girl as his first dance partner, swaying around the ballroom as the rest. They both laughed as they glided around to wherever the music seemed to lead them to, for a whole song that they made their own.

It was done and everyone went into an applause that he of course joined with the girl. Her parents came to fetch her and that’s when he noticed a pair of stares on him, intense and almost like they were trying to pull him somewhere. He tried to pinpoint it and was met with the King and Queen, with piercing angry stares, yet it wasn’t that fearsome when they held the wine drinks Feliciano had chosen for the ball. He knew well they were enjoying it, they just didn’t let their pride show enough.

Louis ushered him to come closer with a single finger and Feliciano obeyed, knowing what was to come but ready to face it.

“Your majesties,” he bowed to them.

“You completely changed the ball,” Louis went straight to the scolding, anger held in her bite for she needed to keep composure.

“Ye-yes, yes I did." There was no need to hide it, it was obvious, and he still wanted to try and show that he was proud, unafraid of whatever punishment they could give him.

“Everything had been done, perfectly and in the order that this castle has always seen it in." She looked ready to smash a foot upon the ground to destroy everything.

“You caused unnecessary turmoil around the castle, changing it to, to, to-” she couldn’t defend herself on the fact that the new decorations Feliciano had chosen were beautiful, much more than the single fabrics and seals she had thought of and had been used constantly for several centuries.

“You invited commoners!” She tried to defend, pointing to them, which didn’t work either, for they were having fun, acting properly and the nobles didn’t mind at all. They enjoyed their presence and were talking, laughing and dancing with them.

“Feliciano, you completely disobeyed your queen,” Aldrich joined, trying to defend his wife. Queen Louis once again stood high, proud that her husband would take her side. He was just as maddened.

“The ball was meant to be something that I would plan for myself. I only did what I wanted,” Feliciano defended, standing just as proudly as the very king and queen.

“But you shouldn’t have cast aside all my decisions! Ones that had been constant throughout the castle for generations!” She was deeply insulted, an expression that the baker had spotted as he passed by, offering one his fudge brownies hoping to ail her.

“People tire of those consistencies. We need something new and different. Balls were made to be enjoyed and to spend time with all our people, not a pretentious display only to the offering of the royals.”

Louis picked a brownie, before turning back to the arising queen intimidatingly. “It is the way of tradition, and by doing this you are-” she took a bite off the treat harshly, “disrespecting our ways and…and…” it was like a spell had befallen on her, of calm and perhaps even a little joy.

All words left her mind, all the troubles along with it, replaced with the incredible taste of the chocolate and the softness the texture brought to her tongue. “This is…this is…”

Feliciano could easily tell the wonder, taking then the rest of the brownie into her mouth, her eyes even rolling in its pleasure.

“You like it, huh? My friend, Signore Jamich-” he pulled him forward, with fudge brownies to spare on his tray, which he offered yet again to the Queen. “Made them himself. He has a wonderful bakery in the city and I just had to have these in the ball."

“Everyone loves them, your highness." The baker was proud for the attention and knew that soon enough he would have many more customers coming over, of all kinds.

“They’re…they’re…” it was hard for her to admit, but she just couldn’t contain herself from taking another, another bite, a bigger smile that seemed to have revert her back to a child. “Amazing! I have never tasted a better chocolate in Germany.”

The baker was just about ready to cry from the joy.

To have the queen of hearts compliment his treats! He would never forget this day!

“Dear! You must have some!” She told the king.

He could not deny and took one himself, a single bite enough to turn his stern expression into surprise. “These are incredible,” he complimented, eating the rest and having to hold himself from taking another.

Begging for such treats would make him look like an infant.

“This can’t be the last time I have these, I require for you to bring some to the castle at least once a week. They’ll be excellent to add to my afternoon snacks,” she had decreed, and the baker had bowed in promise.

“His bread is just as good. I hope it’s all right that I decided that he sends messengers to bring us every morning. The cooks already agreed,” Feliciano told them, and to his surprise, both didn’t mind at all.

“We’ll look forward to tomorrow’s breakfast then,” the queen told the baker, and he erupted with a great big smile, moving away then to keep on handing the brownies to different people who had already eyed them from afar.

It brought the very king and queen to smile, watching as several of their people went forward, glowing with the same expressions they held when they took their own bites. Feliciano couldn’t hold the smirk, holding his hand to his mouth to hide the giggling from the king and queen. They turned back to him, trying to find in them their earlier anger, but it was still held, like the brownies had made them forget how to even command. Queen Louis had raised her hand ready to say something else, when she was interrupted by the laughter of one of her noble guest, who came with another commoner begging to speak. She let them do so.

“Your majesty, I have not spoken to a finer contractor than this man,” the nobleman pointed to his companion, who bowed.

“And I have not met a better financer, and with the brightest ideas,” the other complimented in turn.

“This ball has granted us a meeting, and in it we discovered the possibility for a bridge between the alpine middle point.”

The royals raised their eyes impressed.

The alpine middle point had been a topic of debate for many years. The area is a great cross rode for trade between all the provinces and even to the Diamond kingdom. The possibility of a bridge between the harsh terrains for better passage could be incredibly fruitful for the kingdom. Of course they came forward, already hoping to have the King and Queen’s approval and funding behind it.

They weren’t the only ones. Different groups came, all offering a union of some sort between a commoner and a nobleman for something grand, something that could give them either better access, better structure, new improvements, as well as completely new things. The King and Queen were rather overwhelmed with all of it, and there was no better chance for a dance, in Feliciano’s opinion.

A song suddenly played, a familiar one to the King and Queen, one they had danced in countless of balls, even in Feliciano’s own mansion in Italy, which is why he chose it to play that very instant. The king and queen haven’t heard it in years, and now, with this beautiful atmosphere of felicity and union, they couldn’t fight against it.

They easily pushed aside anyone in their way, to each other, a want in their eyes that reminded them of their once young love, now a chance to revive it and let it show to the rest of the ball. They went into their arms, with dear smiles, once again alive as they made their way to dance, along with the many couples that joined. It was enjoyment enough for Feliciano to stand aside and watch them, swaying by himself to the enchanting music as they took the floors as the King and Queen they were. They were as beautiful as the decorations, stars in their steps, their eyes brightening with it, in so much adoration and love that Feliciano felt slightly jealous.

How he wish to have a love like theirs, to dance just as they were and imagine the starlight sky to be their stage. He would paint this to memory he swore, probably offer the picture as a gift for their next anniversary. They seemed engrossed enough in their dance to last the whole night and Feliciano wished it so, for they were incredibly happy, unwinded and finally enjoying from the celebration. Even after their dance, they joyfully took from the offered wine and spoke on with different people, getting to know a new side of their kingdom that they never let themselves have the chance.

Feliciano wished he could dance once again, that little girl a sufficient enough partner, but she was off playing with some of her friends. He thought of Kiku, but he was busy talking himself to other guests seated on one of the many tables. Gilbert was out, on one of his several drinks of beer, hollering loudly and laughing with both nobles and commoners who shared the love of drinking. Ludwig would certainly not be a good idea, who he hadn't even spotted. With a tired sigh, he settled to the dining room where they were offering larger plates that many guests were enjoying from.

The entire room was filled with wondrous clamor over the recipes he had created and he joined in, easily settling with a group in conversation, occasionally being halted to receive a heartfelt compliment. Sure, he wasn't out dancing in the ballroom as he wished, but spending time with his people, surrounded by exquisite food and magnificent decorations was just enough.

Servants interrupted whatever anyone was doing with the chiming of small bells. All rooms the people of the ball had taken fell into silence, having an understanding that their own arising queen did not. Whatever it was, he decided to follow the lead of many of the guests who began to make their way back to the ballroom. All the guests, from wherever in the castle they were, arrived, filling up the entire room, practically not leaving space for even Feliciano, who had to squeeze himself to be able to get there and see what was occurring.

At the very center of the ball, against the wall, two thrones were prepared, with rich red and golden canopies and glittering star lights to match with the rest of Feliciano's decorations. Trumpets were blown to welcome the king and Queen who came to their awaited seats. They turned to the very large crowd and bowed, and the multitude did the same.

King Aldrich took his seat, making himself comfortable and awaiting for his queen to do the same, yet she remained standing, watching to the crowd with a flush that held evident guilt no matter how erect she stood. She cleared her throat, and prepared her voice to let it echo enough even across the walls. Everyone in the ballroom was supposed to listen, and thus they all remained in the silence their queen needed.

"I had long ago forgotten how magical these kinds of feasts were supposed to be. I was too preoccupied with wanting them to be just as they had always been, just as the books I read and I was taught about by our past deceased queen. I now see that it was all rather ancient and should only remain in old books for history. I was preoccupied with harsh order, limiting who could enjoy and in turn limiting great chances for the kingdom. I was prejudiced, not only for our people, but to our own arising queen and these new choices that I though could only bring forward disaster." By then she had turned to look at Feliciano, knowing well where in the crowd he was standing. She looked and spoke truthfully to him, as if they were

the only ones and there were no judging eyes on both of them. “I forgot that this was supposed to be a chance of freedom for the queen, to let his or her creativity show the beauty of their skill, their tune with the work of the castle, and as I see today, unite us all no matter who we are. Feliciano, you brought a much needed change for the castle and I now apologize, in front of the eyes of all who are here, my children, my grandchildren and my husband, the king, for doubting and hindering your chances, what you could be capable of and showing the true spirit of a queen. I’ve insulted the Aces in their choice and I realize I made a grave mistake. I hope you come to forgive my harsh behavior and that we can work together openly from now on with the true guidance you need so you’ll be ready to take this throne.” She turned towards it and began to move closer. She didn’t sit yet, she gazed once again to her apprentice, hoping to hear any acceptance of her public words.

He could not resist his smile, radiating him like another one of the decorating shining stars. He bowed truthfully, hoping it was a sign enough for Queen Louis to know that he accepted her apology.

“You still have so much to teach me, and I’ll be looking forward to it,” he told her, and she smiled herself, now taking her seat with great relief.

“If you could do this for just one ball, I cannot imagine what you would do in your reign. The entire kingdom has a lot to look up to.”

The entire room erupted in applauses, for the queen’s word and also to show Feliciano that she said truth.

They were indeed expecting great things from him.

The applauses became louder, shouts became enthusiastic and it all made Feliciano blush shyly. He had never received such immense attention that was truly shown, like he could actually see their very hopes arising into the air. He wanted to hug them all and show his thanks with millions of kisses, but he though blowing them would be enough, which only got the crowd to turn wilder and even whistle.

The Queen had raised a hand and slowly they became silent again, the last of their festive shouts dying down until she knew she could be heard again without a single interruption. “We can let the feast begin once again, but of course, we would all love to see a particular couple take their first ball dance in the castle. The arising King, Prince Ludwig Beilschmidt, and the arising Queen, Feliciano Valenti.”

They all applauded and shouted as boisterous as before, but Feliciano stilled with coming dread.

Instantly a space was beginning to be formed for the couple that they were sure to take. Ludwig was released from the group that had been covering him from the eyes of Feliciano for the entire ball. Feliciano didn’t know them, or what they even meant to Ludwig, but he seemed bored, a cup of wine in his finger that he had only taken but a couple of sips from. When he was showed, he was not embarrassed, but sitting as orderly and composed as ever. The news didn’t create any sort of reaction. He drank his glass until it was empty, handing it over to one of the men uncaringly, standing, spreading his hand over any fold his clothing

took and making his way forward to his arising queen through the space his people left him. Feliciano admitted that he looked rather handsome, in a suit of red lined in gold, accompanied with a cloack of the same colors, only more intense, white pants lined in red and black boots.

He came forward until he reached the very spot Feliciano still stood in, questioning if he should run off that instant for no one to find him.

Ludwig, surprisingly, bowed before him, offering a hand as gracefully as a king would. It still wasn't enough to hide his distaste. Feliciano always knew he didn't like dancing…unless it was with himself in their childhood.

Memories of when they danced, no matter where or how horrible it could be, spread across his mind as he stared on to the awaiting prince.

They used to love this so much, they used to take anything as their stage and invent the most ridiculous of moves. Finest and duty didn't matter, but each other's laughter, their enjoyment, and the chance to hold each other closely. There wouldn't be any of that now and Ludwig came over as if this was just another business he was to deal with. His posture and offering were practiced, with no meaning but to make the crowds content and honor an old tradition. The anger was shown, if even slightly, in both their faces, the idea of just denying this dance becoming more and more favorable. But as Feliciano looked around, to everyone's enthusiastic glances, ready to witness something that they considered rather historical, he didn't know how he could disappoint them. Like they looked up to him, they looked up to Ludwig and their union. He could never do anything to take out the romantic context everyone expected of them that instant, no matter Ludwig's coldness.

He tried to hide a groan and he maintained his eyes closed to not roll them. Reluctantly, he let his hand fall upon his slowly, and Ludwig wasted no time in taking it harshly, already pulling him forward to the spot left for them.

The sooner they ended this, the better.

Chapter End Notes

I really wanted to include the dance scene in this chapter, but it was going to be longer than I expected and I didn't wanted to take too long to update. Look forward to it on the next chapter~

EDITED: On 26.10.2024

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The song the orchestra had chosen for their dance was one of the old ones from Louis's collection. Indeed it was romantic, sweet, perfect for the first dance of a couple who were new to love. But to Ludwig and Feliciano, who had danced to many more beautiful and meaningful songs, this was dull and it only made their wish to dance fainter.

They both took their practiced positions, basic from the lessons they had taken. Ludwig had his hands on his waist, Feliciano's on his shoulder, and one free hand in a tightness that was reminiscent of the ones they took when they were children. For a moment that comfortableness returned, that trust, confidence to make this dance show their unified souls, but a look into their maddened eyes made it disappear.

With the adding of violins in the orchestra, Ludwig started their dance rather gently, a simple swaying that didn't require more than slowly moving steps, moving hands, a twirl here and there, and trying to reach every area of the dance circle so all could witness. It worked well enough for all to fall in wonder, a clap here and there escaping, and many glowing eyes wishing that they could either take the arising King's, Queen's or both positions for all that attention and decorative beauty for them. Yet Ludwig and Feliciano were rather bored, knowing well that this wasn't the full of their potential and that it had no other meaning but to please.

With approval of the King and Queen, other couples began to join, circling as if trapping both the arising monarchs for the dance to last the whole night. It was relieving at least, for now they could move less and much more relaxed since many in the crowd lost their eyes to themselves, other couples or continued with other things the ball had to offer.

"Why do you have that?" Ludwig suddenly asked, seeing that now he at least had the chance to speak even as they continued with their mediocre dance.

"Have what?"

"That rose in your hair."

Feliciano went to touch it, still secured like he had placed it earlier. "A little girl gave it to me, and I thought it would look nice."

"It looks ridiculous," he admitted, watching their steps as he took them to another spot.

Feliciano's expression soured. It was a rude comment and he wanted to purposely step his foot on his harshly. He didn't for he knew he would grab attention and who knew what Ludwig would continue to say.

"I think it's rather lovely. All types of queens have worn flowers like this in their hair."

“It’s still unbecoming."

“You used to like it.”

Silence settled, Ludwig didn’t know how he could go against that. True, he had liked it as a child and maybe a part of him still did, but he surely wasn’t going to tell that to Feliciano.

“It was a gift, and I like to keep them to heart,” Feliciano said, proud still no matter what Ludwig thought.

“I can see,” his eyes were clear on the promise cross, and as they neared avoiding being crushed by two other pairs, he took a good scent of his perfume. He knew it well, he remembered long ago being stuck three whole days deciding on the perfect aroma. He had to admit it suited him very well and it made him clear that it had been the ideal choice. “And I can smell too.” He had gotten too close suddenly, which had Feliciano reddening and wishing once again to step on his foot.

A twirl, a far extend, and back to being close to him, much closer than before and then most couples. They continued spinning across the ballroom, although in unique steps from the rest. The dance didn’t matter to them anymore but the escalating of their words.

“I-I hadn’t know what it meant,” Feliciano admitted with a strong dust of red, avoiding his eyes and forcing Ludwig to give him another twirl and be facing away from him. It didn’t stop Ludwig from still holding him as they moved on in that very position. It was even better for him since he had the fragrance of his neck, close and explicit.

“I’m rather honored that you decided on wearing it without a second though only because it was from me,” he whispered directly to his ear, which almost got Feliciano to shiver.

“Once again, I did not know. If I had then maybe…” to be honest, he probably would have if he though on that Ludwig would be as sweet as he had been.

The hesitation was a clear message to Ludwig, who turned him then to face him, their gliding faster this time as they crossed several pairs in a mess. “You’re going to be my queen and groom, it’s only obvious.” Ludwig didn’t say more to the matter, keeping his eyes strict somewhere else, while Feliciano watched their feet wouldn’t trip, seeing as they now went astray in the proper movements.

Silence settled between them and Feliciano found it awkward after what they had just revealed. “What do you think of the ball?” He decided on asking. It caught Ludwig, who didn’t think Feliciano would keep talking to him.

He looked around, to the decorations, the kind of people that were there, the food, the drinks, and all he had to say was: “It’s all right.”

That was it? Feliciano went against the very order of the castle to make a ball to stand out for centuries, and all his future king had to say was that it was all right.

“Is that all?” He questioned, looking purely insulted for Ludwig to see.

Ludwig didn't care, he looked back to him with the same stern expression, as if challenging to get him to say the more that he simply wasn't going to. "Despite what you did, I still think you disobeyed greatly and even disrespected my grandmother," he said like a scolding adult to his child.

Feliciano turned away and wanted nothing more than for this dance to end. "I didn't mean to, I was only trying to prove myself," he defended. "I can't always blindly follow whatever your grandmother says. The next coming years would be my ruling not hers."

"A ruling that you would do well to follow as it had always been. This is not something that you can easily mess around with."

"I won't! Stop insinuating!"

"I have every right to when it's also my kingdom and I am to be your king."

"It's a duel effort, Luddy."

Ludwig never thought he'd hear that nickname again. It was not fitting and to Ludwig it felt like Feliciano was calling him a child.

It had gotten rather heated, the anger menacing to have them take a bite off each other. Their hold was tightening as if ready to strangle and the aura that arose got very dangerous.

Finally the song ended and they stopped along with it in its last echoes. The next song continued as quickly, deserving of a waltz but much more upbeat and to match the earlier festiveness. The couples continued dancing around them unaware and so they wouldn't notice when Feliciano let go from Ludwig's hold, finding a way to exit between them all. He found it and took it quickly.

"I don't have to blindly follow you either," Feliciano told him lastly, turning before he was asked for another dance.

Ludwig stood where he was, gazing rather strongly to Feliciano, somehow trying to get him back with his mere stare.

"You said it yourself, it's supposed to be a duel effort," Ludwig defended, ignoring the continuous dance around him. They were all hazes when they compared to Feliciano, who still continued to move away.

Despite his simple wear, he shone much more beautiful than any other and it was hard to get his eyes away.

Feliciano stopped and turned to him, at a safe distance with a competing glare, close from making it back to the crowds. They're eyes met, the room seemed to have frozen only for them, a moment like in a dream or a fantasy of their mind.

"You're not letting it be," Feliciano burned that dream with the match of his words, showing his back and disappearing with his people, leaving Ludwig in a still, silently wishing for another dance, if even one full of venom as it had just been.

Didn’t it used to be sweet and innocent? It had been one of those hits of realizations that they had indeed grown up.

Feliciano continued through the party, trying to find ailment in the food and wine, but it wasn’t enough. The conversations just gave him more headaches and the decoration didn’t seem to hold its same enhance anymore. He said his goodbyes to a couple of the guests and slipped unnoticed upstairs to his room. All he wanted now was a good night sleep and see if he could forget that dance.

Only a couple of minutes later, as he had hid under the covers with the melody of his chest to help him in his coming slumber, Ludwig had joined him, just as fatigued with the feast as he had been. No words were shared as usual, but both knew that the same thing was bothering them.

Luckily, after the three months that passed, the memory Feliciano had of the ball was pleasant. He did well to hide the occurrence of his dance with Ludwig in the back of his mind.

There was still talk about it and many hoped for another one planned by Feliciano. But his apprenticeship for the queen’s throne was not all about parties, fancy decorations and suits. It was about time he got into the politics, the papers and the mechanism of how the kingdom truly worked. Laws, pamphlets, judging procedures, he was handed a new book to read every day by the Queen. Here he didn’t dare doubt her, taking her lessons and only adding something if he found it necessary, which the Queen tended to find favorable. He had been managing well and to his own surprise he was getting everything rather quickly, part of it having to do with his previous teachings with his grandfather. When procedures were done, sometimes he didn’t even need Queen Louis’s help and when it happened she would place a hand on his shoulder proudly. He was proud himself and would talk on about how happy he was that everything was starting to work into play, no matter if it was servants, maids, or Kiku, who loved to hear about his progressions as Feliciano loved to hear his.

In his excitement, especially after he had to deal with trials that ended really well by his decisions, he would even talk to Ludwig when he arrived at the room, as a joyful child that even danced around the room as he went picking his night shirts and preparing himself for his rest. Most of the time Ludwig would be indifferent, puff out some quick responses, but kept his eyes to his own scrolls and papers that he tended to bring to their room. Feliciano didn’t care if he was annoyed or not, he didn’t let himself be torn by whatever reaction he got, he just simply performed how well his spirits were, unaware that the arising King would sometimes smile under his papers, looking away from him knowing well he would be tempted by his figure moving merrily through the room.

On one particular evening, after Feliciano's usual training with Herr Egilhard on his power and magic, he was called to a meeting in the presence of all the important royals of the castle. It included the King, Queen, Jack, the arising rulers and other personnel important to what they were to speak about. The room they decided to meet in was a small, one with a medium sized table, with some bookshelves holding volumes of reports, a simple chandelier, simple curtains, simple rugs and a single painting of a past queen hanging on an empty wall devoid

of frescos or designs. Whatever this meeting was for had to indeed be for something small since nobody, not even Ludwig, seemed tensed or preoccupied. They were as relaxed as if they were having breakfast in the dining room or even out having a picnic.

It started as soon as all were seated, with some other dignitary dropping a large manuscript with many loose papers that even reached Feliciano in his own chair. He picked it up and saw that it was an already signed command for the changing of busy routes in the city for a particular week that was coming up. Instantly he understood what it was for and smiled ecstatically, trying to hold himself from jumping on his chair.

“Your majesties, the Augusta music festival is to begin in two weeks’ time and our usual orders are in the process of being carried out to prepare the city. This year’s province focus will be the Grecian islands. By your request, Queen Louis, I have called forward a particular visit that is set to arrive tomorrow in the afternoon,”

“Excellent,” she nodded, expectant with a brightness shown eagerly in her face. Feliciano loved to see her this way and grew eager himself to know all the true details.

“The necessary documents need to be signed and as always, we ask for two chaperons to watch the preparations.”

“Which is why I asked the arising ruler to join us.”

All three of them perked with interest, knowing what was coming, but not all three were as anticipated of the prospect.

“Oma, I cannot, you know well how busy I am with my teachings with opa.”

“I wasn’t planning on asking you, Ludwig. This is a duty I will entrust to Feliciano and Kiku.”

Both looked up, surprise in Kuku’s expression, although Feliciano’s was vibrant, gasping and trying to hide any outburst with the unison of his hands against his face.

“Your majesty, I don’t think-”

“Do not worry, Kiku, your teaching with me can wait. In your own reign you will deal with these kinds of feasts as well and it’s important you learn along with the arising Queen," the Jack officially excused him, so Kiku held any breaths that could go to trying to convince him otherwise. Feliciano looked extremely excited about this, and it seemed to spread to the other, who smiled expectantly, their gazes settling again on the dignitary for anything else they should know.

“It’ll be an honor to have you both chaperon it,” the dignitary smiled and bowed. “Other than supervision, you are free to suggest and fix things to your likings. You are the future rulers after all.”

They had heard stories of this festival well enough, wonderful ones that were even the setting for many of the stories they read back at home. If it was anything like they read, they

couldn't bring themselves to change something that was already utterly perfect. They just wanted to be part of it, and supervision was well enough.

"Other than the coming festival, I come with news about another pair of monarchs who showed an interest to the festival and are coming for a visit. They're set to arrive the day after tomorrow."

The Queen reacted with confusion. Usually they were told with time beforehand the coming of other royals from official messengers. If they haven't yet meant they haven't received anything, which was rather odd. Whatever and whoever it was, it must have been a sudden and rash decision, and for only the main organizer to know, must have meant that their only interest was in the festival. But usually when other royals visited Berlin, they were expected to stay in the castle and were to be attended just like a Hearts royal. She'll have to place orders to get the guest rooms prepared as soon as she headed out.

"And who are these monarchs?"

"The arising King and Queen of Spades, Alfred Franklin Jones and Arthur Kirkland," he announced, which earned a groan from both Queen Louis and Prince Ludwig.

Feliciano didn't get why, he used to know Alfred and he had been a wonderful person that both himself and Ludwig used to enjoy their time with whenever he came to visit the Italian province. Things must have changed in the passing of ten years for Ludwig to look maddened about it.

"They're set to marry and inherit the throne in three months, and things haven't gone…" he didn't know how to word it, and he just didn't want to say it was horrible.

"Well?" Queen Louis decided to fill in.

"Exactly. Their parents hope a romantic trip to Hearts during the music festival would be enough to do something."

Hm, sounded very similar to what was going on right in their very castle, Kiku thought, looking to Ludwig and Feliciano, their minds on the festival, on the visit and away from each other like they weren't even there to the other. Kiku didn't dare word it.

"Well-" Queen Louis still didn't seem very favorable to the idea, "-If it's for the best, already decided and they're on their way here, it cannot be helped."

Feliciano knew Louis was busy enough and she didn't need to deal with a distraught couple as well. Feliciano though of dealing with it himself, it had been a long time since he last decided to be a matchmaker. It worked well with his brother and Antonio, with those two cooks, the woman with the vinaigrettes and the baker, and those two teenagers from feuding families in his village. Surely he could succeed in uniting the arising King and Queen of Spades.

King Aldrich and Ludwig were already beginning to stand and leave just when he was about to suggest it. They were off and the Queen didn't mind at all. This wasn't something for them

anyways.

“Raquel, give the necessary listing to Feliciano and Kiku. I hope you two find time to read it before tomorrow evening. We have an important visit and it be best if we have you both know everything that is needed so you can help them.”

Raquel nodded and began to search through his manuscripts for it, the Queen standing ready to leave deciding she was done.

“If I may ask, who is the visit?” Feliciano asked interrupting her departure.

The Queen smirked, hoping he’d ask at some point.

“I thought of leaving it a surprise, but I assume it be best if I told you so you can better prepare. Are you familiar with the Karpusi family, Feliciano?”

It didn’t take long for him to recognize. “Of course, they’re my grandmother’s family.” They were from the Grecian islands and they visited the mansion occasionally, even with his grandmother’s passing.

“Since this year’s focus will be the Grecian islands, I thought it would be ideal to have someone close work alongside you.”

“Who exactly though?”

“Herakles Karpusi.”

A cousin of his, grandson to an older sister of his grandmother. He visited along with the rest of his family, but he tended to be distracted with the cats that were present in his land, sleep in uncomfortable corners and practically avoided speaking to any of the Valenti. Lovino was the one who had a better relationship with him and sometimes he would be the only one Herakles would talk to, but he did have his small moments with Feliciano. Despite being so laid back and rather slow in his speaking, he was very smart and sometimes he could go on and on so passionately that Feliciano just didn’t know how he could interrupt him or even depart from the same room. He complimented his paintings and was the one who even got Feliciano to try sculpting. It had been two years since his last visit to Italy, he hoped he would recognize him.

“Do you mind this?” The Queen asked.

“No, not at all, just haven’t seen him in a while."

“I’m sure it won’t be a problem. Herakles is an amazing song writer and lyre player. His talent will help with the festival, along with others he’s planning to bring.” And Feliciano was confident that he would. He had heard him play before and it was absolutely heavenly. He couldn’t wait to see what else he knew and any suggestions that could add much more to the festival.

The Queen bowed and left along with Raquel, who had given them the scrolls with everything they needed written down. The room was now for Feliciano and Kiku alone, who

watched to the closed doors as if waiting for them to come back and give them more instructions. Seemed like the rest that was missing they would figure it out on their own.

“There’s a perfect study room in one of the highest towers,” Feliciano suggested. He had stumbled upon it randomly a couple of days ago as he was finding a quiet place to study some war treaties. “We can have the servants bring us some snacks and we’ll promise to focus.”

Kiku chortled, he doubted Feliciano could remain silent for too long, especially when it was just the two of them, and he knew himself that he wouldn’t be able to hold himself from joining in chatter.

“All right,” Kiku accepted despite it.

Chapter End Notes

EDITED: On 27.10.2024

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

> I'm sorry for taking some time, but things have become more hectic at my university and soon enough it's going to get harsher :'D So giving the head ups that I will be hella slow in the coming weeks, but let's see how I deal with that. Warning that the coming chapters will have giripan and usuk. For those who dislike them, I apologize greatly, but please keep giving the story a chance, it won't be that much as to make them main pairings, they're just small side ones that won't be of importance once I'm done with this 'arc'. There will be gerita moments throughout of course!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Feliciano and Kiku decided to leave the castle together by the late evening. By Feliciano's suggestion, they walked and took the available trains, which in no time left them in what would be the center of the festivities. It was a square right in front of the main music hall in berlin. From there on, the festival would spread across the streets around them and extend to different parts of the city. Feliciano and Kiku saw that already parts were closed, workers beginning in the settling of stands, stages or decorative monuments. Between that, there was also the hustle of the people taking their normal commune, reunions, and visitors who wanted to take the rich architecture around them. Feliciano and Kiku felt rather diminutive and didn't even know where to start. First of all they should look for Herakles, but where in this mess could he be? They really should have gone to Queen Louis before leaving.

In the plentitude, they finally noticed a tent placed right in the center of the square, next to a monument to one of their biggest composers. A flag of their kingdom and the royal family swayed at the top, and they assumed it was where they had to go.

After the occurrences of the ball, Queen Louis stopped being insisting about clothing, and so both decided on wearing something comfortable and simplistic, a simple blouse, pants and shoes in Feliciano's case, while Kiku wore his red robes that he used to wear on short outings outside his home in Japan. It worked well to not attract attention, but an occasional passerby recognized them, giving them pass and a bow, which Feliciano and Kiku answered to with the same respect.

They arrived to the tent to see it filled with activity of men and women assembling different pieces to then bring out to its assign place. Others talked and others were busy writing perhaps pieces of music or just notes about how preparations were going for the very chaperons who had just entered. They had been so busy they weren't given much attention, leaving Feliciano and Kiku to move about on their own and find their person.

"Do you see him?" Kiku asked, not starting to like being surrounded closely by so many people shouting, screaming and sometimes even pushing.

Feliciano kept his eyes open, not minding, until they he spotted the all too familiar curls.

“Herakles! Herakles!” He called and it didn’t take long for the other to easily recognize the voice.

He had been sitting on some slab of wood reading from both a music sheet and a schedule to the events at the moment planned.

“Feliciano!” He was surprised to see him dressed so commonly. He expected something else from his cousin who was chosen as a Queen.

“It’s been so long! It really is so nice to see you again. How was the trip?” Feliciano had to hold himself from hugging him and going on in chatter. Sure, Herakles and him hadn’t been that close, but he was still part of a small piece of family he hadn’t seen in four months.

“Eh, I suppose it was all right. I wasn’t allowed to bring any of my cats and the coach bumped a lot along the road. I still don’t think I’m used to them.”

The both of them went along in conversation about Herakles’s home, he asked about Feliciano’s family, how he had adapted to the castle and any other small little things about the time they hadn’t seen each other. Kiku was only in the background, unnoticed, and he wasn’t sure if it was what he preferred at the moment. At one side, he wanted to be part of the conversation and get to know Feliciano’s cousin, on the other side, he was sure he would become a stuttering mess.

He was glad Herakles hadn’t yet noticed his strong stare, which was admiring how his brown curled hair fell and framed the beautiful features of his face, an enchanting olive green to his eyes, tall, muscular to compete with Ludwig, and when he smiled when Feliciano started talking about some cat in his land, Kiku swore he would melt, hoping to only be awaken by surely the Ace that was before him. He swore he saw more light in the room, the fray of people disappeared, and all noise was dull just so Kiku could listen to even his hums or smirks.

“-oh, and I just have to introduce you,” Feliciano interrupted the dream state Kiku had entered, grabbing him by the shoulders and ushering him much forward so Herakles could completely look him over. Kiku stiffed, the only thing keeping him from trembling being the tight hold Feliciano had on him.

“This is the arising Jack of Hearts, Kiku Honda,” he introduced proudly.

Herakles gave that delightful smile, and bowed in respect, just enough of a time to see if Kiku could calm down the changing red of his skin. “P-pl-pleasure,” Kiku responded.

“He’s really cool. He helped me a lot my first month in the castle. We study together, and he’s extremely smart. He’s already lead his first ritual at the church and has healed six dying children in the hospital,” Feliciano gloated it all, surely loud enough for the whole tent to hear.

“Uh, uh, uh,” Kiku tried to speak, but he was glad that Feliciano already placed him in a pedestal, Herakles staring deeply impressed.

“The kingdom is lucky to have a Jack like you then,” he complimented, taking notice of the robes Kiku wore, and just the appearance that give him away. “You’re from Japan aren’t you?” Kiku instantly nodded and was hating himself for not answering much with words. “I’ve been there a couple of times already. There’s a really cheap boat ride from my island to the closest Japanese one with two days of travel. The boat ride is insufferable, but the island makes it worth it. Japan is absolutely stunning and I’ve never been treated more kindly. If I could have a second house there, I would." And Kiku took that compliment to heart, breathless and hoping that Feliciano continued to hold him or he would fall down to the floor in a haze.

“I-I’m very glad, I myself would love to visit the Grecian islands, I’ve just never had the chance to." And it was true, he wasn’t just saying it to impress him.

“When you finally do, don’t be afraid to ask me for help, I will gladly offer my services to the Jack,” he bowed once again, only adding to Kiku turning redder.

“And I’m already willing to cover you,” Feliciano planned ahead. "Now, about the festival.”

Kiku was rather surprised that it was Feliciano who put them back to business.

As what was left of daylight continued, Herakles showed them the placing of different stages across the city. He suggested this wonderful idea of decorating the very platforms into different items and symbols important to Grecian stories of the Aces and angels. Feliciano had loved it and approved it, Kiku joining in assigning different ones and where exactly in the city they could be placed. The workers loved the idea as well and right away they set to create it. Herakles, Kiku and Feliciano joined them, although Feliciano stopped after most of the materials were too heavy to carry or he had dropped them accidentally on some of the workers. He realized he was perfectly content just marking in a list the materials used and what they would later need.

Feliciano had been distracted with the work force, Kiku had been distracted with Herakles, and so they didn’t notice how the day darkened and the street lights began to illuminate the still busy streets. Feliciano had not minded staying later, but as his stomach grumbled loudly, he realized he did mind missing dinner at the castle. They should leave, they did have the visit from the arising King and Queen of Spades tomorrow.

“Kiku!” He called him.

Kiku was with Herakles talking about some sculptures he had brought, long gone with any topics of the festival.

“We should get going or we’ll miss dinner.”

And Kiku knew he did not want his Queen to go hungry. Last time he missed dinner he went into utter turmoil and didn’t work on his reports or meetings until a plate of anything was brought to him that night.

Feliciano could tell clearly Kiku was hesitant to leave, and only the force of his duty and his own hunger were the things that kept his eyes and ears away from Herakles and his creations.

“Will you be here tomorrow?” Herakles asked, beginning to pick his own things to leave.

“I guess we can squeeze some time. I really enjoyed working on this today,” Feliciano admitted with vibrancy, one that Kiku wished he had instead of stuttering and reddening to an embarrassment.

“A-as did I. I-I hope we can continue to help with the stages and I’ll be sure to bring us new ideas,” and Kiku bowed, rather excessively Feliciano thought.

“I’ll look forward to them.”

With a couple of last waves, Feliciano and Kiku left the tent, making their way to one of the stations.

“I had a really good time today and I’m ecstatic about tomorrow. I kind of forgot how cool Herakles can be and it was nice to connect like that again. It kind of reminds me of the time-” Kiku let Feliciano blabber on about topics that went past his head, his mind too busy with the conjuring of his image, his tired eyes, his gentle smile.

He completely ignored Feliciano’s chattering all the way to the castle.

During dinner the night before, the messengers arrived with the official information on the Spade arising rulers’ visit. With it they knew they were to arrive in the early morning, which meant that all three of the Hearts arising rulers were expected at the castle entrance earlier before than was estimated. To Feliciano it had been criminal, who was currently still fretting with the buttons of his vest as he headed hurriedly down the castle.

Not even for his power lessons did he wake this early.

He was still late by the expected standards, which was the reason for his rush and the skipping of his breakfast. It was pain to his spirits, and as he arrived to meet with some guards along with Ludwig and Kiku who were already standing in their place, he didn’t understand how they can very easily deal with this, indifferent expressions without a care of the hour and their taken sleep. He looked quite lowly standing beside them, hunching as he tried to regain his breath and rolling his sleeves to get some better air.

“You’re really wearing that?” Ludwig looked disappointedly to him.

“This is a Silvanus,” Feliciano pointed to the vest he wore, red with golden designs, only the best from one of Heart’s past designers. He had made a collection specifically for the royals and Feliciano liked to use his things for important dealings as this. Still, it was the only thing of riches that he wore comparing to his white blouse and typical red pants and black boots that Ludwig swore he had worn the day before.

“It’s not enough, wear something more dignifying next time we have a visit like this."

“If I feel like it, Ludwig.”

“Don’t you-”

Kiku was glad the gates opened and the sounds of horse hooves reached their ears before it began to get hostile.

The new coach came at rapid speeds, wildly, jumping and swinging and having the three Hearts royals fearing that it would tumble down on its side, but whoever drove it kept it at bay somehow. It was before them in a matter of seconds, for them to finally notice the blues and violets with symbols of Spades. The driver didn’t have the reigns of his horse, catching his breath and laying down upon his bench panicked, even with the coach’s stillness, afraid to move and fall in a heap to the ground.

“Oh come on, Marlee, it wasn’t that bad.” The one who held the actual reigns sat rather proudly, not fazed at all by the speeds he had decided to take. This figure then noticed the three royals and waves to them, a charming smile that Feliciano instantly recognized.

“Alfred?” Feliciano questioned.

“The one and only all mighty arising King of Spades, of course.” He jumped to the ground, being respectful enough as to bow to them, and in return the others did the same.

Alfred had only changed slightly. His blond hair had become a little darker, slightly tanner skin surely by the many times he went out to work in his kingdom. Taller, stronger features in face and body to compete with Ludwig’s own, and rimmed glasses in blue that weren’t enough to hide the same blueness he always held in his eyes.

“Ludwig! My man! The one and only potato king!” Alfred greeted first, and not with the handshake Ludwig was expecting, but with a slam of his hands that left Ludwig in sudden stillness as he tried to realize what had just happened.

Alfred moved to Kiku, a respectful bow as he was taught. Kiku was just a stranger. “My own arising Jack, Yao Wang, has written and read about the things you have done in the Japanese province, as well as here in the German province. I’ve been impressed, and I hope Ludwig hasn’t read any of my…incidents to you…I’m honestly a good guy,” he tried to convince, with a pretty bright smile that was enough of a trick.

Kiku bowed as respectfully, taking his word. “Do not worry, he has not,” he lied. “I myself have heard of your additional ailments to the growing motor industry in your kingdom. In a couple of years it would have a technological advancement to envy, and we hope by that time we have established better trading and diplomatic relations to share in that advancement."

“Awesome! I look forward to that! I like this guy!” He patted Kiku rather harshly in the back, before moving to the last, leaving Kiku stunned, rubbing his back and trying to hide any groans of pain.

“Feli, Feli, Feli,” Alfred approached him with a grin that Ludwig glared at from the side.

“Alfred,” Feliciano bowed in greeting, not being able to hide his grand smile. He was so happy to see him again and could only think of all the fun they used to have as kids.

“Ten years!”

“It has been! It’s so nice to see you again! I hope the stay is to your liking and that you enjoy the coming music festival."

“I’m sure I will! But come on, none of this political shit! I still remember how you used to love hugging people.”

And Feliciano still did, sadly royal life didn’t let him as much.

They both opened their arms ready for a welcoming embrace, but suddenly Feliciano was pulled back to a rather warm but also possessive tight hold that was settled on his waist. He lay close to Ludwig, too close to what he had been used to in the last months. Feliciano was surprised, and when he looked up to him, he saw dark fury in his eyes directed towards the Prince of Spades, strong enough to cut right through him if he so wished. Feliciano was fearful to do something against it, so settled easily into his hold…which was actually nice, and he had to stop himself from letting his hand rest on the strength of his chest.

“Oh, I forgot, your fiancé and all.” Alfred felt the death stare and settled on moving back and mellowing it out with his boisterous laugh. “Which reminds me I haven’t introduced you all to-”

“I’ll do it myself! Thank you!”

The door to the coach was suddenly slammed opened, revealing a blond spiky haired young man surely of Alfred’s own age. Unlike Alfred, he seemed much more fixed and poised, coming down from the coach in the elegance of a gentleman. He only held a large book in his hands, which had probably been his distraction to not hear his own fiancé’s commotion, the wild coach ride and his arrival to the hearts royal castle. As he approached and bowed before them, Feliciano could take a better look at his slim figure, pale skin, dusted with freckles, rather abnormal large eyebrows, but pleasing and beautiful green eyes that stared to them with a respective gleam.

“Arising Queen of Spades, Arthur Kirkland, your highnesses. Pleasure to be of your acquaintance."

“Pleasure is ours,” Ludwig said, enough to settle his sudden anger.

“I would like to apologize for the suddenness in our visit, but the King and Queen of Spades asked rather desperately for this and we could only confide and obey as only the arising rulers."

“Do not fret, we can quickly prepare and adjust. Our servants will bring your luggage to your shared room. We will all have breakfast in one of our terraces.” Ludwig moved aside, Feliciano still in his hold, extending his arm so both Alfred and Arthur could move along and enter the castle.

“Sweet!” Alfred quickly dashed along, hungry and already wanting his helping.

Feliciano hoped his extreme eating habits had died down since their last encounter, but a quick look to Ludwig, which he had close to see to detail, sighing and groaning, proved that it hadn’t changed at all. Arthur moved behind him, with an apologetic stare to the Hearts royals, hoping to stop Alfred before he left the table empty. Kiku moved ahead, and Feliciano wanted to do the same, but he was still caged in his King’s arms.

“Uh, Ludwig,” he called his attention, suddenly feeling it all fall awkwardly.

Ludwig seemed to have forgotten he had been holding him like that, instantly letting go when he noticed, dusting his clothing, standing back straight, his cold uncaring expression returning, refusing to look to Feliciano now out of embarrassment.

“I apologize, do-don’t think too much about it." And with a clear blush on his skin that Feliciano didn’t fail to notice, he moved behind the rest into the castle, leaving Feliciano alone with the servants who began to get the things from the coach.

Despite what Ludwig said, Feliciano did think about it, and as he did, a smirk spread on his face, a laugh escaped, which got some curious gazes from the working servants.

He decided to follow inside then, knowing fully well that Ludwig had gotten jealous.

Sure he didn’t like this possessiveness over him, especially by someone who hadn’t shown to care in the last months, but behind it he knew there was some caring intent. Being shown that hold…in it was the capability of what he could if he was loving as he had been, breaking whatever shell he forced himself into so they could finally-…he really shouldn’t give it more thought, it was only bringing him to hope. There was nothing, nothing, nothing.

Sadly they couldn’t visit Herakles with the preparations of the festival, they had been too busy with Alfred and Arthur to find time. As so, Feliciano and Kiku decided to leave first thing in the morning the next day and spend the rest of their time there, seeing as they didn’t have any of their power lesson or other duties to invest themselves in.

Another day to wake up earlier than normal to Feliciano, who was detesting it more and more, shown clearly in his still tiredness and sluggish steps. The only thing that kept him up and not making him decide to sleep on the stairs was Kiku’s great interest, who couldn’t stop talking about the festival and his cousin to even Arthur as they shared tea in one of the balconies.

Speaking of which, he was surprised to already find him so early in one of the study rooms, reading the same book he had held the day before when he arrived. Feliciano approached the room quietly, as to not disturb him, reaching then to leave a gentle knock on one of the bookshelves that decorated the room.

“Buon giorno,” he greeted when looked up, startled as if he was suddenly awaken from a long sleep.

“Oh, uh…good morning." It took him a while to pinpoint the language.

“It’s pretty early for a guest to be up and about in the castle. You know you can sleep till whenever you want. Did you have a bad night?”

“Oh no, not at all, I just usually wake up at this hour. Thought I would catch up on my reading."

“What about Alfred?”

“The baboon probably won’t wake up till midday, so please enjoy the silence in the castle while you can,” he said rather harshly.

“I don’t think you should be talking about your fiancé that way,” Feliciano commented meekly.

Arthur didn’t comment, settling even more in his book, trying to forget the other arising Queen’s presence, but Feliciano just couldn’t let it be. He promised himself that he would work what he could to bring them together, as the King and Queen of Spades wanted, but to do that he needed to know the roots of their problems. Surely he could learn them from Arthur if they kept on talking and thus he hatched an idea.

“Hey, why don’t you come with us?” He suggested.

“Go where and with who?” Arthur returned his attention.

“Kiku and I are helping with the preparations for the music festival. You can go see the locations and watch how everything is set up. They give us amazing snacks and we get to see a lot of things before the actual start, like today we might even get to hear bands practice,” he tried to make it sound as alluring as possible, an excitement that Arthur saw he was definitely not lying about.

It did sound intriguing, an occurrence different than just lying about with a book that he had already read. He did come to Hearts for something new to do, a sort of adventure or dare he say romance different from what he had expected ever since he first arrived and got used to the monotony of the Spadian castle. He sighed, somehow disappointed that he easily let himself be swayed away by this comfort.

“All right, I’ll go and take a look,” he accepted, closing the book and hiding it well between others in the bookshelf, remembering it’s place well to not forget. “When are we leaving?” He turned to him, phlegmatic despite his real interest, unlike the explosive radiance from the arising Queen of Hearts.

Feliciano instantly took a tight hold of his wrist and led him outside in a run. “Right now!” He shouted, not giving them a break to stop until they met with Kiku.

Chapter End Notes

EDITED: On 28.10.2024

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

> Uni has been so harsh, I want to cry, barely got any time to write. Luckily because of the elections I got some free time and managed and will immediately start on the 22nd tomorrow. Keep expecting slow updates in the meantime though, but sometimes I might surprise.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Arthur, after nine months of living under the wealth of royalty and staying away in another castle with the same riches, did not expect to actually be standing by the side of the arising Queen and Jack of Hearts…walking the streets and taking a casual train over to the square like they were common folk of the city.

He felt so awkward standing there in the train, with many stares on him, surely on the rich blue and violet coat with obvious symbols of Spades. Rumors spread easily in the wagon of who he could be, so Arthur tried laying his attention solely on the conversation Feliciano held about something simple as a game of football.

How could they deal with this so normally?

They reached the square filled with the same work force from the day before. Many more areas were closed but what mattered to the trio was the tent, now much larger to accommodate the bigger amount of people that came and the larger works they created. Feliciano and Kiku moved knowingly with easy steps, eager ones in Kiku's case, while Arthur moved behind awkwardly, looking incredulous to all, surprise by so much going on in an instant. How could they keep order? How could Feliciano and Kiku keep up with it? They finally met up with Herakles, who had been talking to some workers about the size of one of the stages, thinking of changing it all together. When he noticed the three approaching, he excused himself and quickly moved forward to greet them. Kiku this time did it as properly, with right wording without a single stutter. He had practiced enough before his mirror.

"We're so sorry we couldn't come yesterday!" Feliciano quickly apologized.

"We received the news from the castle, don't worry about it! But right now we need your help on some of the lighting effects in Meike square!" Kiku was rather disappointed that they instantly set off to their business, which was surprising to himself since he was usually eager to begin in his own work. "Feliciano, I decided to leave it for you," Herakles handed him the scrolls and papers with the information, a pen to fill in anything he needed. Feliciano saluted in approval. "And Kiku, why don't you join me in the sound testing?" Kiku approved way too quickly.

“Arthur come on, you can come and help me!” Just like that morning, Feliciano took his wrist and dragged him along outside, rushing through the crowds until they reached their spot down several streets.

Although not as closed as the main square by the music hall, worked still continued, a dazzling stage with a theme to the ocean, extending with different decorations that were already outstanding. Why would they need work on lighting? It was just enough as it is.

The square itself was long, surrounded by fish stalls and stores with sea related items, jewelry, medicines, and a little bar and restaurant that surely specified in sea food. It was quite beautiful, rare for its floors were red mosaics trying to resemble the flow of waves, going up in spiral stairs with nice little areas to rest and talk. Seats were already being prepared in those heights for the show. It was quite obvious why they gave this one the sea theme. Arthur was deeply impressed, so as Feliciano, and he had already come here.

They moved forward and talked quickly with one of the leaders, who told them about their lighting problems. They really wanted something more than just small random blinking lights on the edge of the stage and were hoping for ideas from the very arising Queen. Feliciano didn’t instantly have one, so he settled with sitting in one of the heightened banks, just staring with resounding hums, hands pinching his chin as he forced his mind to only think about lighting effects. Arthur, sitting by his side, after admiring enough of the square and the preparations, began to grow bored, sighing and beginning to notice the different shades of red that made the colors of the tiles below. This was not as exciting as Feliciano promised and he was just about to tell him how he could make his way back to the castle when his eyes caught the top of the stage mixed with the tiles and moving clouds of the sky. He got an idea.

“Feliciano, how much is your kingdom’s capacity of light shows?” He asked.

“Uh…” to be honest Feliciano didn’t even understand the question. “We just put…light bulbs,” he pointed to a box of them at the bottom by the stage, enough for Arthur to see that they were a poor quality, surely only to last for the festival and then throw away. They didn’t even give out the best lighting.

He suddenly stood up, picking up his spade symbol pocket watch from his suit. "Do you mind if I work on something?”

“Go ahead.” Feliciano was curious.

He saw before his eyes as the pocket watch was succumbed into light and began to turn into a sapphire long wand, with flowering designs and a main Spadian symbol at the handle. Arthur tested it around, swift movements to let it rid from any excess of its transformation.

“If you don’t like it, I’ll rid of it easily.” With a breath, some quick enchantments, he moved the wand like the leading of an orchestra, white sparks flying and covering the largeness of the top of the stage, as well as any other surface that could go with the rhythm he had in mind. It grabbed the attention of many of the passerby who stopped to look up and see what this strange Spadian man was creating.

After the light of the magic subsided, Arthur took back his seat, a small smile on his lips proud of what he had made. Feliciano joined in the sudden awes with the rest of the crowd, watching as the stilled sparkles glowed in a ripple from side to side, making the lights give the final touch that truly made the square look like they were flowing with the push of the waves in the middle of the sea.

“Oh my Aces, Arthur, it’s wonderful,” Feliciano rasped.

Arthur couldn’t help the proud smirk, leaning down on his seat, fueling himself with the constant compliments that were thrown all around him.

“You did say they were going to give us snacks,” Arthur reminded, beginning to feel hungry.

“Oh, of course!” Feliciano broke from the dream haze and called for one of the workers to bring them something forward.

Feliciano would honestly make do with a single fruit, some cereal, oh but a slice of bread with hazelnut chocolate sounded wonderful. He got all of that and more, with some tea and coffee, all presented in a rich table that the workers brought along with bows and respect just like the servants would in the castle. Arthur readily took his cup and began to eat without a care, while Feliciano sat perplexed, as if afraid to come near the table.

“What’s wrong?” Arthur asked, noticing his expression.

“Uh…nothing, I just didn’t think they had to do this. They could have just brought us whatever everyone else was having." Reluctantly he took the bread and the cup of coffee.

“We’re arising Queens, Feliciano, this is just what’s worthy for us.”

Feliciano hummed and took his sip and food, yet with a fault that continued to leave an atmosphere that Arthur couldn’t ignore.

“Let me guess,” he started, having heard this narrative many times before, “ you’re of peasant background from some forgotten farmer village in the middle of nowhere in the Italian province, introduced suddenly to a lifestyle of riches that you haven’t managed to get used to, even in the four to five months you’ve been here.” He continued his tea knowing.

“Actually no, I’m a Valenti. We inherited riches left behind by my ancestor, Romulus Valenti, as well as those we make ourselves from our farming lands. I’m from noble status, I had already lived a lifestyle similar to this,” he admitted calmly, with no malice from what Arthur had assumed. “But I am from a beautiful farmer village named Barga, you should give it a visit sometime.” If Feliciano held that malice, Arthur could have taken that statement badly and hostile air could have grown above them. But Feliciano was actually being truthful, a present smile and continuing with his coffee.

“I apologize, you just seemed so humble,” Arthur admitted.

“I just want to be treated like any other.”

“I doubt that’s possible in your position.”

“I can still try.” He began to take from some grapes, noticing then the stillness Arthur took, somber as he stared off around him, his mind elsewhere.

“Let me guess,” Feliciano though he could take part of the game, “you’re from a rich noble family, where you were pampered excessively to the point that they didn’t even let you leave your mansion. In that seclusion you learned magic well and thus moving to the Spadian castle made no change, the only problem is dealing with a fiancé who is extremely outgoing and boisterous.” He held a smug that Arthur didn’t think he could utter, it was almost comedic.

“Actually, no,” he answered the very same way he did, with a chuckle and even sitting up to prepare for his explanation. Feliciano seemed really surprised about it. “I’m from…peasant background, from some forgotten village in the middle of nowhere in the English province in Spades. When I had been born with the mark, people constantly though that it was a fake placed by my mother, being a witch and all.” Arthur drank his tea calmly, the words seeming quite normal for him to tell, yet Feliciano stared on astonish, not expecting this at all. Arthur gave this ready air for royalty that Feliciano only saw in those of high class. There had been no hint of peasantry, not in his clothing, posture, and even looks.

“So, I was right about your learning magic in your household then."

“Precisely. The Kirklands in England are a known wizard family, one of nobility. Sadly, being a bastard strip that off from me, but my mother still made sure to give me teachings like any other in my father’s family, as well as conduct appropriate for any court. My magic was always the most important, a part of me as blood. When I came into the castle, my power was far more advanced than even my arising King and Jack’s. They had to get me the best wizards and witches in my kingdom to actually be my instructors since no one in the castle was fit enough.”

Feliciano was entranced, losing any interest in his half-finished coffee to only listen, leaning with his head on the palm of his hands with true interest. “I’ve never heard about the Aces choosing a bastard child as a Queen."

“The Aces never really care about anything but potential, which they seemed to have seen in me as they saw in you.” They both clinked their cups in worth. “But I refuse to see how they saw it in Alfred. You were right, he’s loud and boisterous and it has been one of my problems dealing with this new change. Three boys the King and Queen bared, two of them would have made perfect matches for a Queen, yet they chose the most misbehaved as my betrothed. I keep swearing it was only to test me.” All his satisfaction was gone, but an intense anger that was ready to search for his king and strangle him upon that moment.

“Alfred can be pretty…eccentric, but he can be a gentleman.” At least from what he had remembered and he heard and read from letters. “Has he actually been a gentleman to you?” Feliciano brought up to him curiously as he finally finished his coffee.

To his surprise, Arthur went silent, a scowl shown, and for a moment Feliciano thought that indeed it was the treatment Arthur was not given…that was until the future Spadian Queen began to blush.

“So…he has?” Feliciano tried to understand.

“The goat has been trying to flirt with me ever since we first met.”

“Trying?”

“His advances I find horrendous and they only mock me.”

“But he’s…trying, I’m sure they can’t be that bad-”

“He once told me he wanted his dick held like I hold my wand early in the morning.” Okay it was horrible and Feliciano cringed at it.

“Uh…”

“It only gets worse,” Arthur retorted before he had to say more. “But I will admit, he has been trying to make my stay in the castle to my pleasure. In some cases he works excellently and other times he has…” he blushed, recalling something sweet, Feliciano could tell, “… done things for me that I can consider to be somehow romantic, but it’s not enough to erase what his family has done.”

That perked Feliciano’s interest, for there was something behind it that was much more than just the Spadian King’s explosive personality.

“What…have they done? If I may ask.” He didn’t want to sound too intrusive, but Arthur didn’t seem to mind, taking his breaths to prepare to tell him.

“It’s a situation going on in Spades that in mine and Alfred’s reign would be one of our main problems, probably in the rest of the kingdoms if things go as Spades is planning.” He set aside his tee cup and plates, all empty, no distractions or pauses for what he was to tell.

“Spades has always excelled in the use of magic, our wizards and witches renowned throughout the world. In fact, in the past, for many centuries, the very kingdom was governed by ancient enchanters, elves and tribal fairies, their laws creating the basis on how the kingdom works, is energized and depends on. Of course, that all changed when the line of Jones started and when humans began to grow in population to reach similarly like other kingdoms. Although the humans in Spades do possess their own kind of magic, it’s not as powerful as those of Hearts.”

It was true. Hearts’ elven and fairy populations were rather nonexistent, and if there were, they usually came from either Spades or Clubs. They did have plenty fantastical creatures like dragons, phoenixes, St. Mark lions, and griffins, which the humans easily adapted with and some say that they began to use magic from those animals’ influences. It made them powerful enough, immersed, and peaceful with their own magic that no other human in any of the rest of the kingdoms possessed.

“Humans in Spades could not confide in magic as others did, so they decided to make other things that could equate. They began with contraptions they built themselves, finding new fuels that didn’t depend on magic at all, so they wouldn’t need any help from us. The Aces kept choosing human rulers, who began to impose on these things more and more until the laws changed to their favor and other creatures began to value less in our society. Our

positions were taken, we began to be mocked in the streets and even violence arose against us. Many moved away from the American province into the English or Chinese province, where they are more accepted and common, but it is still not enough, we all still find ridicule and hardships."

Feliciano could see utter hurt in Arthur's eyes, for it was his kind of people that were suffering, and he wanted nothing else than to hold his hand in comfort, but he didn't know him enough to know how he could react to such contacts by practically a stranger.

"Alfred's mother and our current Queen is a tribal fairy, and it surprises me that Alfred didn't inherit any of her magic, but the usual power expected from a King. Still, he's interested in a technological advancement as his ancestors had been and he's pretty determined to make the expected heights, which will mean riding all kind of magic and loosing complete dependence of it. I thought I could convince him to change his mind, but he seems to always ignore me on the matter. I once overheard him talking to his father about destroying an old elven temple just so they could build a train base from our capital city to a hill top village in China, which only proves to me that Alfred would just be like any other who would ignore the needs of my kind," he sighed and slumped in his chair, not wanting to show the dread that had been bothering him since his arising started, but it was hard when it was a heavy problem that always taunted him even on a vacation as this.

Feliciano watched him intently, expecting new words of confidence, but nothing else animated him again.

"Have you really tried talking to him about this?" He told him in ease.

"Like I said, he usually doesn't pay enough attention."

"Then make him," Feliciano dared suggest. "Arthur, this has do with people who are suffering and are looking up to you for new hope. As the Queen, you should be just as imposing as Alfred. Demand for answers, create meetings, speak out, don't let Alfred govern without your own voice."

Arthur still remained silent, looking up to Feliciano with the same unaffected expression.

"I don't know how I can reach that so easily," he already sounded so defeated, but Feliciano was determined not to lay him in it for long.

He suddenly stood, the resolution seen obvious. Arthur was rather surprised from it. "Make Alfred realize that magic is needed! Right this very instant!" He pointed and swung, eager to get them going right back to the castle, forgetting the duties they still had in the very festival.

"He barely even uses his own, he won't get it."

"He's King! He's supposed to use it or else his body could get hurt!"

"He does what's necessary so he doesn't suffer the icing. Doesn't do a good job at it though. He's only skillful when it comes to the use of weapons." Arthur disliked it, as so did Feliciano.

“Have you seen him trained to really know?”

“Of course I have, usually our training is done together, as with every arising King and Queen.”

Feliciano went eerily silent.

“You…don’t train with Ludwig?”

Feliciano was embarrassed to admit he hadn’t.

“That’s…odd,” Arthur only dared say. He really wasn’t that knowledgeable in the Hearts Kingdom to understand what made the King and Jack separate their training.

“Have you at least seen him train?”

Feliciano now leaned his head down, flushed red from shame.

“Hm,” Arthur lay in though, leaning back once again in his chair. “Alfred was telling me last night about having a spar with Ludwig tomorrow in the early evening. Why don’t you come with me to watch?” He suggested.

Feliciano peeked up interested, but wondering if he should. He was rather skeptical about it, and part of him felt like there was a reason for this separation, but the curiosity got the better of him and he nodded to Arthur’s suggestion. He kept telling himself that it was only to see what Alfred knew of magic and to try and talk to him that evening about Arthur, not because he wanted to know to what extent Ludwig’s power had grown.

On the next day, Feliciano told Kiku that he would not be accompanying him with the working of the festival in favor of staying with Arthur at the castle. He didn’t specify for what, not sure on how Kiku would feel about it being the arising Jack and knowing more about how their power training was supposed to work. Kiku didn’t seem to question further, especially when he knew he would spend more time with Herakles alone. He dashed quickly out of the castle, leaving Feliciano wondering, thinking that perhaps Kiku was just really determined about the festival coming out perfectly.

He had his usual simple breakfast with Arthur, both conversing on history after Arthur witnessed a mural in the breakfast room. When the time came, they both made their way to the training room that Arthur had learned would be the one in which Alfred and Ludwig would duel. It was rather low to be led by the arising Queen of another kingdom through your own castle, but Feliciano had never been to this training ground, opposite on the other side of the castle from his own.

When they both arrived, a simple crowd had gathered in the upper level, a hardened net separating the onlookers, a protection from anything that could go awry from those who battled. They were all tense, eyes set straight on the occurrence, not seeming to notice the entrance of two arising Queens.

From the shouts, clash of weapons, and the occasional spark of magic, it seemed that Ludwig and Alfred had already begun. Feliciano and Arthur eased close, gentle as to not attract attention from anybody, and settled on the edges, holding to the railing of the balcony as they witnessed the battle like everybody else.

Both Ludwig and Alfred held their own swords, powerful and beautiful ones that had their own excessive decorations, showing their kingdom and their own person. It was obvious they were costumed just for them, made with mind of their power and movements, which moved along with them as if it was truly another extremity of their body. Their hold on it was familiar, knowing exactly where to hold to swing, to slash, to even throw in the air and be confident that it would come back to their hold securely.

Ludwig fought with great ferocity, fire burning in his eyes without the use of magic, powerful and even vengeful. To him, it didn't seem at all like it was just a friendly challenge, but a battle to the death in some distant war torn field. Somehow Alfred remained content, a smile on his face as he defended well, with a tranquility knowing of the game they had settled it to be.

Soon enough, the desperation had hit Ludwig, as so he began to use more of his magic, rays of fire that shone splendidly like a fireworks show. Everyone in the crowd awed at them, ignoring their intent of hurt, as Ludwig did a wondrous move in which he took the remaining of the flare to attack once again, a more powerful flame than he had concocted at first. Feliciano's face widened with great impression, his own eyes glowing with the color, stirred and with a pang of envy. He wished he could do something like that, flames growing and spreading like an array of spectacular paintings.

The grounds heated, one that even made Alfred sweat worryingly, but it still wasn't enough for him to release the few magic he knew himself. It was becoming harder when Ludwig only grew vicious with his fire attacks, even letting his fingers glow in red with some burning intent, surely for if his own sword failed him. Alfred sigh defeated, he would have to use it then, holding Ludwig with a meet of metal, as he took his breaths to bring it forward. Once the exercise was done, his eyes glowed more dangerously blue, a smirk as a warning of what was coming, but it didn't do anything to phase the burning fire in Ludwig.

Ludwig shone very handsomely with it, fitting to his power, stature and future kingship. Feliciano placed a hand on his chest as if to avoid his heart from beating too fast to escape, to settle it, to think to himself that it was only the agitation of the battle.

Frost appeared from Alfred's breath and soon his own sword glowed in blue, a cold one that dimmed the heat and even made Ludwig pause, moving back before it got dangerous. Alfred began to get just as ferocious with his magic, a burning ice of blue that he swung rather carelessly around, which made it easier for Ludwig to avoid, an occasional amber field he created with beautiful intricate designs no matter its suddenness and how it was meant to not last. Still, it was possible to hold off Alfred's attacks while he thought about what he could do.

"See what I mean," Arthur commented to Feliciano, who was suddenly awakened by the hardened state he had on his arising King, forgetting the battle and the purpose of their visit

being Alfred's use of magic. He only nodded, but returned his vision back to Ludwig, who was flaring his own sword preparing for a harsh swing.

The shield was removed and he attacked on, and by sheer luck Alfred defended the blow with his icing one, mixing with a bit of his time manipulation to try and make Ludwig's movements freeze. It was beginning to work, Ludwig's left movements slowing down. Alfred was already laughing out his victory, unaware that Ludwig's free right hand was beginning to grow with a scorching flame, dangerous, practically drowning the entire room in its red.

It was so beautiful and intense that Feliciano couldn't help but stare deeply into it, the growing warmth mixing along with something within him. It showed in his eyes, coming alight in amber like it had done earlier, only more intense. Without Feliciano noticing, magic arose from himself and it mixed with the growing magic around the room, joining along with his other spiritual companion, until he subconsciously aided in the use of his power. Feliciano was not in control of how much he gave, but it was too much, too much for the arising King and his still defects. The burning became too much, until it brought pain, until it scorched, and soon enough everyone knew something was wrong when the smell that arose was that of burning skin.

Ludwig's sword fell to the floor, he released an angry growl of pain, cringing forward and holding down to the hand that burned to try and ease it, but the agony continued. Alfred had stopped, easing close to try and help somehow. Everyone around them inched closer, whispers of concern growing.

"It's odd for the prince to miss a spell like that."

"This is different."

"Something like this hasn't happened since he was a child," they said.

Arthur was meaning to ask Feliciano if he knew, but when he turned to him, Feliciano had a distant look, watching with concern to Ludwig, his eyes still continuing with its rare glow.

"Feliciano," Arthur called slowly, placing a gentle hand on his shoulder to wake him from it. As soon as he did, the glow disappeared and his face took a more horrible expression when he truly noticed what was going on.

"Hurry, get some healers!" Alfred had called as he tried to help Ludwig, but he didn't want to take it, beginning to stand on his own, his mind making easily the connections of what happened and meaning to deal with it that instant, not caring about the burning hand at the moment.

He looked among the crowds, his teachers, other servants and maids who liked to watch, and finally he let his eyes met with his arising Queen, and furiousness like the very burn in his body grew, enough for him to push Alfred aside and begin to move up to the balcony. His steps were harsh, instilling enough fear in everyone in his ways to move aside or even run away from the training grounds. It was a surprise Feliciano could still stay standing, facing him as if he was ready to take what he had for him, even if he was shaking and fearsome as the rest, even Arthur taking refuge behind him.

When he came close, Ludwig took Feliciano harshly by the shoulders with his unburned hand and dragged him away, to a room in the area that was usually meant for his teachers to discuss his training. It was messy and small and surely not the room he would have wished to do this in, but it was the closest and he wanted to get on with it immediately. He practically threw Feliciano into the room, closing the door harshly behind him and locking it tight, facing it.

“What were you doing here?” He asked ferociously, a tone that only made Feliciano move back, afraid that Ludwig was only there to tear him apart.

“A-Art-Arthur suggested it, he-he wanted me to see how A-Alfred used his power,” he told, easing the more back, but only meeting with a bookshelf. There was no more space to move.

“Was that really all?” He sounded exasperated.

“Well, I need to know, since I’m trying to help them.”

Ludwig took a breath and Feliciano hoped he calmed with it.

“Don’t meddle with things that are not of your kingdom, unless absolutely necessary.”

Although he was more relaxed, he still scolded him like a child, which annoyed Feliciano, and he decided to pretend he hadn’t heard him.

“Also,” he finally turned to him, and the earlier burn of his eyes returned, instigating fear once more, making his trembling begin and the diminishing of his standing, “Don’t you ever dare came to my practices or challenges again, unless the Jack or King says so. I though your trainers told you about this.”

“They-they didn’t.”

“I’m telling you now then." And he eased dangerously close, his head practically laying on his forehead, to make him truly understand his words of warning. “I don’t want you near my training grounds and I don’t even want to feel your presence anywhere near me when I’m using my power. You saw what can happen.”

Feliciano took a quick look to the tattered skin of his hand, parts still glimmering in hazing fire, yet Ludwig continued to stare down at him, indifferent to the pain now. He suddenly remembered how this used to happen to him constantly in the past, having to do with his early power activation. Ever since he came back to the castle, he hadn’t seen Ludwig go through any of those past exercises, relaxed and seeming masterful in his control now. Feliciano though the power had grown into his body throughout the missing years, especially with his heightened stature and broadness.

He was wrong.

It was probably still continuous, in some way he didn’t understand and no one had bothered to tell him as always, and this time it had been his own fault, a joining of their power that was still too much for his body to bear. Despite how angry Ludwig was with him at the moment,

Feliciano felt hurt for him, wishing it could go back to the days when an embrace or a kiss were enough to calm him, enough to ease the pain away and settle with the healing in great smiles. Those times were gone, and all Feliciano could do was nod, slowly and still fearsome, wishing he could finally sit down and relax.

“I hope you understood.” Ludwig turned and left, unlocking the door and slamming it back in his leave.

Feliciano still lay in the room hesitating, for now liking the shelter it had turned to, away from the turmoil the castle would be in once they found out and while they tried healing the arising King.

Chapter End Notes

EDITED: On 28.10.2024

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

> I love it when I update quickly. Sadly my next one will take a while since in my coming free time I will use to work on an important research plus extra readings. Still I will try to sneak in writing when I can. I hope you enjoy this chapter and please be patient for the next.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Feliciano awoke at a more reasonable hour, yet with a carefulness that was rather odd from him. Usually he would skip or run merrily down the halls, his presence obvious to any other who passed by him. But that morning, he tiptoed his way, hiding from any seeing eyes.

His main goal was to go unnoticed by Ludwig

After the fear he went through the day before, he though the best thing was to avoid him all completely, unless in their shared room, where he had made sure to cocoon himself in his blankets. He was extra wary, even trying to overhear the steps and rustling around him, hoping every time it was just the rush of a maid. He had to be quicker if he wanted to meet with Alfred on time before he busied himself with something else. He was so close, so close- he halted completely when he could easily feel Ludwig's presence from one of the opened rooms. He was pacing around as he read some scrolls, Feliciano reading determination in his expression, too preoccupied to notice if anyone passed, Feliciano hoped. As he turned to pick up another, Feliciano moved forward, quick yet gentile, like a feather. When he was far from the vicinity, he was relieved to finally take hardened steps, running with the familiarity everyone knew him with. He was just coming down a pair of stairs when he noticed the Prince of Spades, making his way to the breakfast room, Feliciano knew.

"Alfred!" He called with eager intent.

Alfred instantly stopped and perked, recognizing. "Hey!" He waved, turned and move towards him, meeting with the other just as he reached the base. "Just in time for breakfast! Come on, I heard the cooks are going to make a huge omelet just for me. I hope they stuff it with loads of cheese." His mouth already watered at the image, but Feliciano though he was going to be nauseous.

"That be wonderful! We should have it by one of the balconies. It's a beautiful morning, we have to make use of it." Alfred didn't mind at all and followed him forward.

Once the servants were told of their location, their food was brought, including Alfred's abnormally large omelet, practically taking the whole table. Luckily Feliciano only had a cup of coffee and his usual chocolate filled cornetto, finishing quickly and taking his time to

analyze the view of the city from their heights, as well as Alfred, who continued on eating joyfully unaware. He waited until his plate was empty, which really didn't take that long, a large burp announcing his pleasure.

"I should come here more often," he commented.

Feliciano only chuckled, finishing his coffee and placing it on his empty plate to later be taken. "I was talking to Arthur yesterday," he immediately started, which got a concern look from Alfred.

"Was it about that time I named a hole after him?" He panicked.

Feliciano's expression instantly turned sour, the idea so awful he lost completely what he meant to say. "No! And don't ever say something like that to him again!" Arthur was right to not tell him anymore of his advances.

"Yeah…I know, it's…horrible," he admitted, feeling embarrassed, hand rubbing on his arm, looking away so hopefully Feliciano wouldn't see the shame in his eyes.

"Not exactly how I wanted to start this, but good enough. Alfred-" he got suddenly serious, yet with his ever present kindness that made it bearable to hear, that didn't make him fear as Ludwig would have done, "-what is it that you truly feel about Arthur?"

It was a simple question, but Alfred felt a heaviness with it that didn't calm at all the still shame that continued. Feliciano eagerly awaited an answer and the prince trembled with a childish blush, trying to move his hands as if to push himself to say something.

"He-he is to be my Queen, an epic romance should be expected." His cockiness was brought back, but Feliciano could easily see the doubt, for he was still red and his eyes continued to wander.

"Has it been really?" He didn't wanted to sound so harsh, with the same gentleness as ever, but no matter how he said it, it was still hurtful for Alfred to hear since it was a reminder.

The boast completely disappeared to a frown, a truthful expression that Feliciano knew would show in his words now. "He probably already told you that it hasn't."

"Why?"

"Because well," he hated having to admit this, "I'm not so good with all this romantic stuff. I tend to fuck it up and make myself look like the biggest fool in the kingdom," he groaned. "They don't really teach you how to deal with this."

"I know that..." He commented with a deep sigh. "But there's something else you're not telling me about."

Alfred looked up rather innocently, having to search through his mind too long to the point that Feliciano couldn't leave him waiting any longer. "The issue with your machinery advancements and magical folks," he reminded, casting the spark just enough for Alfred to

instantly connect. It was not a good reminder, for any dim light that emitted from him completely disappeared now.

“Oh…that, um…I know it looks bad, but hear me out okay," he was ready to defend, so Feliciano prepared himself to hear that exactly, begging for an answer with his pout and intense stare. Alfred never though he would see such an expression on him. He took a deep sigh, sat straight, ceased his nervousness and presented himself like he would to a court instead of a good friend.

“Look, I’m not as heartless about this as Arthur probably made you think. I truly care about this situation and want to do something, it’s just hard.”

“What is making it?”

“It’s …well, my family, the people, they all want this and have been trying to achieve it for years. I had already created some things myself and new ideas keep pouring into our waiting. To tell the truth, it’s what I also want. I enjoy this, it’s a great prosperity to our kingdom and the rest could soon be a part of it. I don’t want it to be so drastic for others, but how can I stop something that I’ve already worked so hard for," he tried to convince and Feliciano could truly feel fault, but he was not falling weak just yet.

“But have you stopped to think about Arthur? He’s part of that very group that depends heavily on magic. Do you know what that means to him?”

“He-he hasn’t talked to me about it.”

“He’s tried to, he told me so. If you would have, if you would understand, then maybe gaining his heart wouldn’t be this hard for you.”

The prince went silent, looking away, hands griping on the fabric of his pants.

“Alfred, you and Arthur are both unified leaders, thus your decisions should be just as unified, with a conscience of all inhabitants of your kingdom. I know you want this heavily, but truly think about the consequences, new solutions in which everyone can have what they want, excluding whatever your family thinks. It’s your ruling, your future, as well as your kingdom’s, not theirs only," he made clear, for a moment reminding himself of his mother. He sounded just like her, mixed well with the words he learned from Kiku that day when he had been groveling over the planning of the ball.

Silence settled for too long, and in the meantime, Feliciano though of something, thinking about their relationship mostly. “Tell you what, promise me that you will talk about this with Arthur seriously, and he has to tell me about it. If you do, I’ll help you in romancing him.” A smile came to Feliciano’s face that Alfred could easily trust, and for once in the conversation he actually smiled back. He nodded, albeit still doubtful, for he was nervous to address something so problematic in his kingdom, but he knew well that he had to if he wanted something that could please every inhabitant. But he would cross that bridge, for it was important to reach into Arthur’s own feelings, and with Feliciano’s help, he knew it could come out fruitful. He shook his hand and promised, and Feliciano knew he would keep it.

“All right, I have some time before I need to head off to work on festival preparations, so tell me, any idea of what kind of things Arthur likes?” It could be a good way to start.

“He’s Arthur, he likes a lot of things, but mostly his magic, and he’s really good at it. He has an addiction to tea and these weird cake things that I find pretty tasteless." He pulled a face reminding himself of it. “He likes to deal with the magic folk, being it from pixies to the most respectful of elves. He tends to get a load of things from them, even illegal stuff that used to belong to King Khaos or Queen Pisa. I have to admit he has a pretty impressive collection back at the castle, I doubt I could give him something so rare and powerful. Okay and uh….what else." He lay in more thought, scratching his chin as he continued to analyze him well in his mind.

“What kind of things do the creatures give him?” Feliciano though it could help, leaning close, interested in knowing himself for they sounded wonderful and utterly magical.

“Charms, necklaces, rare ingredients for his potions and spells, and books, loads of them.”

“Books? What kind?”

“Sometimes they’re old ones with ancient spells and information on the kingdom, but other times it’s just…stories."

“Stories?”

“Yeah, short ones or novel long the size of my head. You always see him with one in the castle and it’s sometimes hard to get his attention away from them.” He sounded clearly disappointed, for many times he had tried to impress him with his words or anything he had done at the moment only to be plainly ignored.

That was a lead they could take, and Feliciano was about to suggest it until he noticed the time in Alfred’s pocket watch, sitting upon the table. He was late.

He suddenly stood, breaking the calm that had settled, which was rare for the both of them. “Books! Got it! I suggest you start thinking about something that you could use from that! In the meantime, I have festival working. We can continue to talk about this through dinner.” He picked his red coat and headed off, only a wave and smile as a goodbye and he disappeared down the halls.

Feliciano had to pick some handbooks from one of their study rooms, reaching the room on his way and piling them up in his arms until he made sure he had all of them. He was ready to dash out to the new sun of the day when a shining blue glint from the spine of an unfamiliar book caught his attention. He stopped in his rush to stare towards it, captivated by its form, rich in blue and growing vines in the front with a tittle that read ‘The Gift of the Sapphire Rose’ rested on a design of what the tittle mentioned. It seemed crafted just for the view of it, too precious to even read. It took him a while but he finally recognized it as the book Arthur had brought with him, which he had excessively read ever since he arrived. He had been too distracted to notice its unique beauty, scolding himself for the book was so precious it even held jewels encrusted into it.

He looked about the halls in the vicinity, the very room, wondering. It wouldn't hurt to borrow it. He could leaf through it only for today and place it back before Arthur noticed. Besides, he would surely get distracted with the hundreds of different Hearts Literature around them that would surely be completely new and interesting to him. Without another though, he took it quickly as it was just another in his pile of handbooks.

At the festival, after handing the handbooks to Herakles, he left him to simply watch the work around him in the tent. With the festival coming ever closer, there was more haste with the preparations, which meant that more work force was occurring, too much to simply pay attention to one detail. If something had gone wrong, then it was pass the flaps unnoticed to the arising Queen and surely some other worker would notice once anything was placed where it needed to be.

The blue book was still in his hold, looking at him from where it rested on his lap, tempting Feliciano to go with his reading. He really wasn't doing anything of great importance. A little break like this shouldn't be a problem.

Carefully he opened it, meeting with a beautiful drawing depicting the four Aces. It shone with glowing metallics, in all the distinguish colors of the kingdoms, easily showing which Ace was which. It seized his breath, having to touch the pages to feel the softness, proving that yes, someone had actually made something like this. Surely the product of the magical folk in Spades. He turned the page for another drawing, of a young angel who worked diligently for the Aces, pages showing all her kind of work, from sweeping, to cooking, even sewing. Each picture held the very same craft, continuous wonder that held the same shine, making Feliciano truly dive in this and even dim the sounds and movements around him.

Finally he met with a just as beautifully cursive writing, detailing the story of the presented pictures.

The girl's name was Teresa, a lower angel that the Aces adored for her hard work, kindness and felicity that was always well liked in the castle, bringing much serenity to their heavens.

New pictures were presented, of another girl that Feliciano could already feel evil intent from, similar to the vibes he felt to those of King Khaos's men. Her name was Elfrieda, who was very jealous of Teresa and wanted nothing than for her to fall in wickedness.

In the Aces' heaven, there were door portals that granted the access from their world to that of what they had created, grandiose and explicitly drawn in the book, designed in bigger riches than any of their castles could reach. The only ones allowed entry were the very four Aces, the rest of the angels and creatures forbidden unless ordered by them.

Elfrieda used this to her advantage, and thus one day had opened the door portal that revealed the Spadian Kingdom. She gazed until she found a struggling old woman, creating a flood that would surely drown her. Elfrieda had told this to Teresa, and in her kindness, she had rushed forward and helped the woman, trespassing the portals and returning before the Aces could notice.

But the Aces knew, they could feel it, sadly without the knowledge of what Elfrieda had created. The evil angel had overheard the Aces talking of giving Teresa a chance if she admitted to her crime. Elfrieda told this to Teresa but instead she convinced the good angel to keep lying no matter how insisting they were to the question, and that is what she did.

The Aces, enraged and betrayed, vanished the angel to forgotten woods in Spades, where she lived alone, covered well by a wall of thorns placed upon by Elfrieda herself so no one could reach her. Teresa had wasted away there for years, her wails causing a haunting feeling through the forest that made many travelers weary from entering its vicinity.

Only but one knight dared to come close, curious and hoping that he could somehow bring comfort to the poor soul. He could only see small glimpses of her through the wall of thorns, conversing with her and trying to bring her whatever happiness he could. He began to fall for her, her words enamoring him enough to want her own affections somehow. She refused to, tainted by Elfrieda's betrayal. Yet the knight was willing to prove himself and asked for any type of challenge to win her heart.

The challenge was to present her four flowers that were only available in the Aces' grace. Gold lilacs, chamomiles of emerald, a ruby rose, and her favorite, a sapphire rose. It was not for vanity or for glory, but because she knew what it would take to create the spells for it, and if the knight could go through it, thus the ultimate proof of his love.

The knight went off, hoping to be lucky enough to find them or find magicians, elves, fairies or dwarves that could help him in creating them. He visited temples, read ancient scrolls, lived for weeks under magical influences, and managed to stay in castles in his studying. He traversed all four of the kingdoms, and in each he learned to create with his own energy the flowers, with added magic that would make them lively for centuries to come.

When he returned to the wall of thorns many months later, he came back a man of study and professionalism, known well throughout all four kingdoms for his dedication on getting these difficult flowers for a beloved. Teresa had given up her hope for him after he had taken so long, but he was finally there and through the few cracks she could see, he held an entire bouquet of the flowers she asked, but the biggest, being the hardest and her preferred stood well between everything, the sapphire roses. They were so beautiful that she dared move close to the thorns, touching and dreading such separation. Luckily the knight had learned powerful enough magic to pull out his sword and defeat the wall into pieces to the ground.

Finally they stood before each other, human and angel, fully to witness their distinct beauty, falling into their arms and declaring outmost love. It was one of the most beautiful pictures in the book, extending two pages with so many curved details and colors that Feliciano remained in it for minutes on. He only turned the page out of curiosity over what happened to the two lovers.

Pristine pictures of their wedding, of her human transformation and finally the birth of their girl, gifted with the mark as the coming King of Spades, Lianne Coy. Feliciano recognized that name from his history book and was surprised to know that this was the story of her conceiving, or perhaps just a legend created for the fancy of children. Angels or even Aces barely made contacts with those of their world, unless for maters of kinship choosing. It seemed extremely unlikely, but Feliciano wanted to believe as he leafed through it again.

He transported himself to the setting and a smile managed as he dared cast himself as the angel, adorned with wonderful white and red loose fabrics, wonderful golden crowns, and powerful wings like those of a St. Mark lion. He wondered to whom he could decide as his Knight, and very quickly the image of a Ludwig in the high king armors of their kingdom appeared on his mind, riding across different cities and villages finding the gifts to prove himself. It didn't help when Feliciano had once received a very similar gift from him.

He groaned and scolded himself. Ludwig was not going to be that ideal.

As he rubbed his hand over his face as to erase the image, he caught Kiku approaching, standing out rather brightly between the hurdles of work.

Who could really ignore him when he wore a very bright red kimono, designed with beautiful flowers surely native of Japan. Was he wearing makeup? Did he smell perfume on him? This was all rather bizarre from the very simplistic man he had gotten to know in the last few months.

"Kiku?" He was rather shocked, but still as impressed.

Kiku looked seductive and alluring, surely catching the eyes of many in the tent. The closer he came, Feliciano began to notice a tint of red on his cheeks and a blissful look in his eyes and smile.

"Oh, Feliciano, I thought you were going to stay in the castle today."

"I can't let you deal with this all alone, but look at you," he pointed with his hands obviously, to all the accessories that made him stand out. "You look like an expensive doll! Why? Did you audition for a pageant show or did some designers take you as a model?" He spun around him, noticing many more details of the kimono, showing him that it was rich, with silk and gold, surely meant for high balls than just as outing to the city, especially to work in a festival.

"No, I just…felt like wearing it." The blush and the nervous smile made Feliciano question it, but he was distracted by the coming presence of Herakles to continue about it any longer.

He greeted him, expecting him to come with a new sort of job that he could do. He approached with hands behind his back, shyly and with redness similar to that of Kiku's, eyes set on the Japanese man only, ignoring all completely Feliciano's presence. Feliciano didn't mind it when it gave him the chance to witness and see, both uncaring of their surroundings.

They remained silent, only communicating with a gaze of their eyes, smiles, and even a fidgeting of their postures. They seemed nervous to speak and Feliciano was close to pushing one of them to do so since it was getting agitating.

"Di-did you get what you needed to?" Kiku finally asked.

"I di-did...did I take too long?"

“Not-not at all.” He was still too nervous to continue speaking, reeling to himself, falling into calm before he continued to ask. “Wh-what is it that you wanted to give me?”

Herakles hands fidgeted behind his back, until he grew the courage to move them forward, revealing a large dull metal ring that surely he had picked from around the preparations.

Feliciano felt just as disappointed as Kiku, but then he approached, placing the ring over the arising Jack’s head. Under his breath he uttered enchantments and right by Feliciano’s eyes he watched as Herakles himself began to use the metal to bend into pink and red blossoms, grey leaves and little white buds, all around until an impressive flower crown was in its place, magnificent and imperial to match well with Kiku’s outfit, like a true King instead of a Jack. When it was done, his hand moved down his soft black locks, caressing the side of his face, Herakles with a look of devotion, Kiku with his gratitude and a smile unlike anything Feliciano had seen from him.

And that’s when Feliciano realized two things. Number one, Herakles and Kiku were surely head over heels for each other and now he had two couples that he had to help. Number two, he knew the perfect gift that Alfred could make for Arthur.

Chapter End Notes

EDITED: On 29.10.2024

Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kiku still wore the crown proudly as Feliciano and he made their back to the castle. The arising Queen looked diminutive next to him and for once he enjoyed this ignorance to make his route much more comfortable. By the time they returned, many servants had stopped their work to ogle at Kiku, throwing him compliments and some even daring to throw him a kiss. Kiku took all of them kindly, but truth was that the only reaction he had wanted to see was Herakles's, and with it he got a magnificent crown that made his dress the more refine.

When Kiku and Feliciano entered the dining room, all were starting with the appetizers and they had stopped instantly once they saw how Kiku shone. Regally he took his chair, a plate instantly placed for him, and he began with eating with the same honor everyone saw him at that moment.

“Kiku, what is this?” Queen Louis asked with no malice but true curiosity. She was just as impressed as the rest.

“Surely your most prestige tailors in Japan made this,” Monika said, taking into her hand one of the long flowing ribbons.

“They did actually. Thought I would use it one day for a ball,” he admitted proudly to them.

“Why didn’t you wait?” Louis sounded very disappointed.

“It was sitting too long in my closet. I thought I could take it out for some fresh air,” he shrugged, seeming uncaring as he continued to dip vegetables in his tzatziki.

“You look wonderful,” Arthur complimented kindly.

“Thank you,” Kiku nodded to him.

“Was the crown made with it?” The Jack asked, spotting a slight difference in its coloring and presentation.

“No, it was actually-” and he began to blush as he caressed his arm with a gentle hand, that distant look in his eyes that Feliciano was beginning to distinguish. He chuckled against the pieces of salad as he brought it to his mouth. The Jack noticed it as well and instantly knew that there was something more to it.

“So, what is it?” He asked again, quite fretting over his answer.

It was odd for Kiku, it sounded too attentive and begging, and he didn’t know if he wanted to tell him about it.

“It was a gift,” he hoped it was a good enough answer.

“From who?” He still went on.

An intimidating aura settled above the dining room, one that even made the servants shaky as they introduced their main dish of pasta and tuna niçoise salad. Kiku settled on eating, but he could still feel his jack’s imposing glare on him. He was half way through his dish when he decided to answer, not liking all these stares on him when they should be eating themselves and not letting such a small thing bother them.

“Herakles Karpusi, one of the main organizers of the festival. He thought it would go well with what I was wearing, and I agreed.” He didn’t dare continue looking at him, trying to finish the plate to escape this as soon as possible.

“Other men don't create enchanted flower crowns for the Jack just because they want to play dress up,” he pointed.

Kiku was finished, pushing the dish aside ready to leave. Dessert wasn’t looking that good.

“It was only a small gift, there’s nothing wrong with it.”

“It is wrong when this person is obviously trying to romance the Jack of Hearts.”

Kiku blushed heavily before them all, proving easily what was happening and revealing Kiku’s clear feelings.

“What if he’s trying to? What if I accept it? I don’t think it should be a matter that we should be discussing here.”

“It should be, such a thing is not permitted,” he made clear with a high voice.

Feliciano lost interest in his food, looking up with a worried glance to his arising Jack, who easily faltered to the words.

“You’re wrong! I didn’t read about this in any book.”

“I’m afraid he is right Kiku,” Aldrich suddenly interrupted, with his usual kingly aura that made every word absolute. It only added to the growing fear inside the arising Jack, yet showing a stance of strength. The only thing that gave away to his sudden anguish was in the tight hold he gave his chair, Feliciano fearing he was soon to throw it either to the Jack or King.

“Why?” He at least wanted to know, braving himself for what he was about to hear.

“The Jack is to remain celibate to his position and power,” the Jack started.

“Many Jacks have married and bared children, some of those had even been born with King or Queen marks,” Aldrich retorted.

“Because it was decided by the past Jack and King, mostly for connections of wealth to the castle or alliances to another kingdom or new province."

“I thought that was more for prince and princesses without an Ace mark."

“The Jack will do just enough, in fact, he or she holds more power than a markless prince or princess. We have to keep you available for if the chance occurs, it could mean a great deal to the kingdom.” He sounded like it was simply a business transaction, stern in his glances, looking uncaring to the arising Jack, who grew just as stern but with flaring anger he did well to hide by keeping his gaze away.

“So I must maintain abstinence from relationships I want just so you can use me as a pawn,” he arose rather angrily, but still managing to keep his stillness, driving in whatever emotions would cause him to break down.

“You should only do what is best for your kingdom and you should be willing to make such sacrifices for the good of it.” A clear finish was stated and the Jack glared on hoping to not hear another word from his pupil.

Feliciano awaited Kiku’s next angry response, placing his hands on the table, ready to stand up and defend him. But no. In a mantra of breaths, Kiku relaxed enough, as if the words of the Jack did their spell of convincing.

“For the kingdom, I’ll do what is needed,” he resigned, to the proud smile of the Jack.

“I’m glad you understand it’s for the best.” And they let him go, as swiftly as a calming breeze. All of the anguish suddenly disappeared from his figure, like the conversation had never appeared and his heart hadn’t been hurt.

Feliciano couldn’t leave him like this, and he stood just as the echoes of the dining room doors came shut with his exit. He glared to all of them, blaming them for their rudeness and rushing off to comfort his friend how he could. The others let him, knowing well that Feliciano really wouldn’t be able to change anything.

Feliciano couldn’t find him in any of the nearing halls, having to reach the ones of Kiku’s living quarters to find him.

“Kiku!” He called, stopping him before he shut himself into his room.

“What is it, Feliciano?” He feigned as if nothing had happened, trying to look annoyed that Feliciano was simply disturbing his coming sleep hours.

“Are you all right?” He asked.

“Quite."

“Don’t lie to me, Kiku! I’ve known you well enough to know when you’re feeling hurt,” he imposed.

Kiku only continued to fake neutrality, holding the door as if ready to smash it against his arising Queen’s face. “What do you expect to do?”

“Why don’t I stay with you for the night?”

Despite how much he wanted to continue showing this façade, he nodded, knowing it would work well to bring him ease for the turmoil only Feliciano saw.

“I’ll be right back!”

He rushed to get some things back in his room, doing well to ignore Ludwig’s questioning glares as he picked up blankets, pillows, clothes, music box, and then left.

Feliciano had felt rather giddy about this, remembering the days he had Ludwig staying over, nights of playing games, singing or talking on and on until dream overtook them. He had the sudden idea to suggest Kiku one of their many games to keep him happy, but once he arrived to the room, Kiku was unconcerned, preparing his bed as any other day. He removed his lovely kimono, all make up was washed away from his face, the perfumes disappeared, and the crown now lay at his short bedside table. Feliciano neared slowly, meaning to sleep in Kiku’s own mat, but it seemed he had separated it to give Feliciano his own spot. The blankets and pillows were so thin compared to his own that were heavy and overly decorated. Still he dropped them over his side and made himself comfortable, keeping a heavy eye on Kiku as he joined him, taking his own side, pretending he wanted to rest, but Feliciano could easily tell his distress. Kiku stared on to the ceiling above him, not even turning, like Feliciano wasn’t even there. The arising Queen stared on to him, expecting something, but Kiku remained as he was, until Feliciano decided to do something about it.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” He suddenly asked, trying to near for the response.

Kiku remained silent for another long moment, and Feliciano had wondered if he had even listened to him.

“There was nothing I could say,” Kiku breathed out, turning his head away, hoping that Feliciano though he’d go to rest, but his Queen was rather persistent.

“Of course you could have! You could have said-” he though it over, leaning his upper body upwards as he tried to maintain a continuing gaze with Kiku “-that it was none of their business.”

“I actually did say that."

“Then you could have told them to leave you alone! They can’t make you decide who you fall in love with, and they can’t give you away to some business marriage like that. You’re the Jack of Hearts, your worth more than some petty marriage just for extra funds, like we don’t have enough.” He rolled his eyes, looking over to the great riches they were already surrounded with. “You should have a say in it! Enough the Jack does for the kingdom! It shouldn’t be rewarded with a loveless marriage or none at all,” he insisted, leaning closer but being careful as to not get too close and risk being pushed away.

It managed to give Kiku a smile, but it was easily drifted the more Kiku gave it though.

He couldn’t dare disobey the Jack.

“It’s surely a heavy set law that we can’t do anything about, no matter our opinions. Leave it as it is, if we do, we’ll be going against something perhaps decided by the Aces.”

“The Aces wouldn’t do something like that,” Feliciano hoped, thinking about the very union they had accepted with him and Ludwig. The silence was settled by himself this time as he gazed over to his ring finger, where the mark was still present, a constant reminder.

The Aces would surely know what they were doing, there had to be a reason for all of this. He hid his hand as to not let his mind continue with the subject, staring alongside Kiku to the simple pink colored ceiling, trying to fill it in with the image of their words and thoughts.

“You like Herakles, right?” Feliciano questioned.

Another one of Kiku’s extended breaths, his gaze rummaging around the room as if trying to find a distinguishable answer to give Feliciano.

“I-I do, but I shouldn’t, now when I know it can hurt the kingdom." He turned to the other side rather embarrassed about his feelings.

“There’s nothing wrong about it. It’s wonderful, it’s beautiful, it’s something rare that you should have the chance to feel,” Feliciano defended. “I’m sure it’s really not going to do anything,”

“You can’t be too sure.”

“You know what, I will be, I’ll change it myself!” He decided, which got a panic stare from Kiku.

“Feliciano, don’t!”

“I’m serious! I’ll be sure to change that! I’ll research what I can tomorrow. One of the first things I’ll do in my reign is change that law.”

Kiku was getting too tired, his head was starting to hurt, the heartache continued and he needed rest from it all. He settled deep into the blankets, figure still, eyes now to the floor to keep him grounded to the coming sleep.

“Rest, Feliciano! Don’t waste time for my sake, think about the kingdom instead.” And not a peep was heard from him again for the night, no matter how Feliciano stared and kept on expecting.

With a tired sigh, the arising Queen had finally given up, turning as Kiku had done. He turned on his musical box and let it drift him into rest, dreams settling as it turned off by itself joining the silence of their sleep.

The castle was busy with its own preparations for the festival. A big light show was expected on the final day, as well as an orchestral presentation from the music hall at the very entrance, for all to come and listen. Feliciano paid no mind to the rushing servants and continued on

with his goal. Kiku was dealing with the festival as per usual, Herakles coming himself, which Kiku didn't even know how to feel about anymore, but worked on for the sake of the festival.

"Alfred!" Feliciano called, spotting him along one of their many halls, probably lost. "I got an idea!" He instantly said.

"To help me with Arthur?"

"Yes! Now come on, we have to start as soon as possible!" He pulled him by the hand and led him to one of the large study rooms, away from the commotion, with just enough peace to deal with this in tranquility.

As they went their way, Feliciano had told Alfred about the book, the tale, the pictures, all until they reached the room, Feliciano continuing on as he dropped books upon books on the very large table.

"Did you hear about the story before?" Feliciano asked as he searched through one of the high shelves, using a latter to move him around other spaces.

"It's a common Spadian fairy tale. My mom used to read it to my brothers and I as children." He picked one of the random books, leafing to see it was one specializing in creating gold, another was about flower forms, another about creation spells for simple beginners. "What does it have to do with Arthur? And what is it with these books?"

Just then Feliciano had found a book specifically about roses. He slide down the latter, almost tripping at the end, but ran forward to place it along with all the others, uncaring if he almost fell.

"You're going to create that very bouquet!" He decided for him, now picking random books from the table, to see which would be best to start with.

"What? Are you kidding me? Feli, if I remember correctly, those flowers were created in gold, rubies, emeralds and sapphires!" He sounded terrified of the idea.

"Exactly!" Feliciano continued on excited.

"I though Arthur and I made you clear that my magic is horrible! I can't possibly do something like that!" He was just about ready to take the books from him and place them back, to take the prospect away alongside with it.

"That's the point! With it you're going to prove you're capable about learning magic just as you're will be willing to help the magical folk of your kingdom! Arthur would surely love the effort and would be glad to give you a chance!" He was very confident about it, a glorious smile on his lip as he decided on a book specifically about creating flowers. It was not the type Feliciano wanted, but it would help them give them a good start.

"Here!" He presented the book, "we'll start with creating a leaf!"

And their small training began, testing Feliciano's patience for Alfred, more a mess with his magic than he had expected. He repeated the words wrongly, he moved his hands in too much of a hazard, and when he did create something, it came out wilted, cracked and brown. They wasted a good amount of minutes on just a leaf, but when Alfred finally achieved it, Feliciano gave in to applauses that were enough to drown the sounds of the door opening.

"Now, I think we should start with a simple lilac," Feliciano decided.

"What are you two doing?" Came the startling voice of the arising King of Hearts.

Feliciano jumped and almost screamed.

"Oh hey, Lud! Feli is helping me out here with some magic," he told him with good ease.

Feliciano wished he could have that instant calm whenever it came to dealing with Ludwig.

"I thought you weren't interested," Ludwig reminded, coming into the room.

"I thought I was too, but it's all going to help for a gift I'm going to make for Arthur!"

"What kind of gift requires all this mess?" He pointed to all the opened and thrown books on the table.

"Golden lilacs, Emerald chamomiles, sapphire and ruby roses," Alfred admitted.

"What?" Ludwig stared on incredulous, knowing well Alfred's problem with his magic. He took blaming glances to Feliciano, but the arising Queen was ignorant to them. "What mess did you pull him into?"

"I'm only helping him, what is so wrong about that?" He moved past him and picked up another book to begin with another lesson. "It's going to take us a lot of practice and a lot of time, so I would prefer if you left us alone immediately." Feliciano didn't even turn to him as he finally settled on a good lilac spell.

"Alone?" Ludwig suddenly questioned.

"Yes, alone. Is there a problem? Alfred is a good prince I can trust, there's nothing to be worried about." Feliciano glared to him with a quick glance, before pushing the book for Alfred to take and read. Alfred just shrugged, confused at the situation, switching his full attention on the book.

Feliciano waited patiently for Alfred to start trying and for Ludwig to finally leave. Yet Ludwig wouldn't, taking questioning glances to just about everything in the room until he settled on one of the chairs. He pulled it and took his seat. "I'll…be staying. You might need my help."

Feliciano could obviously tell it was just an excuse to get him to stay, for such a reason he did not get. He rolled his eyes and quickly began with helping Alfred. He took a better grasp of the wording, but his movements were still wild, Feliciano having to hold him and better guide him, much to Ludwig's annoyance.

After several tiring minutes, Alfred had finally managed a simple lilac. Feliciano applauded proudly, but Ludwig groaned heavily for all to hear.

“When do you need these for?” He asked.

Alfred began to think about it. “It be nice to have them by the end of the festival. It’s bound to be really romantic, with like, all the decorations and the music playing.”

It was rather cute for him to blush and smile at the imagery, which earned a loving chuckle from Feliciano. That did it to Ludwig, standing up and reaching closer to them, practically coming between Alfred and Feliciano. He took the book and closed right before them, throwing it over to the pile. “You will never make anything if you continue like this."

“Do you have better ideas?” Alfred asked. “Do you even know how to make these?”

“Actually, I do,” he admitted proudly.

“No kidding."

“Why don’t you show him, Feliciano?” He turned towards him and Feliciano grew rigid, not expecting for Ludwig to remind him of them, or even command him to fetch them. He called a maid to do so, rather embarrassed to hand those in once she did, letting Ludwig know he had actually brought them with him to Berlin, and had even kept them clean and intact, a clear sign that he had cared for them ever since Ludwig gifted them.

Ludwig let a sweet grin expose as he gazed to them, showing them to Alfred, who awed and held them carefully, knowing of the great wealth it held.

Feliciano couldn’t believe it, eyes freezing on that, if even small, beautiful smile. He grinned himself, blushing, rubbing both his arms to control this sudden growing heat.

It was only a small reaction, just smugness. He told himself to bring it down.

Alfred took one of the roses in the bouquet, falling more in wonder when it grew in his hands and turned even redder.

“This is incredible!” He complimented, taking other flowers of the bouquet to continue watching the same splendor. “Damn, how long did it take you to learn to do this?”

“Countless days with sleepless nights. Nineteen, but heavily determined. Still have the scars from the burns and cuts I had gotten, but I got the tricks from continuous reading."

“Wow, you must really love Feli to go through something like that for him.” He gave him a smug grin, to which Feliciano frowned, and to which Ludwig easily made the statement forgotten with a heavy cough, taking the flowers and placing them back in their golden box and handing them back to Feliciano.

“In the process, I learned a quick way to work on it, and create any kind of flower I so wished."

“Then come on! Tell me!” Alfred begged, in such a childish way that Ludwig was close to denying him.

“You’re lucky! In elder times people took months to create these.” He turned fully towards him to make it clear. “The spells kept being mastered until they found a clear component that made it instant.” He seemed rather embarrassed to have to admit it, but Alfred was never the patient person.

“So, what is it?” He asked forwardly, close to practically shaking Ludwig for it.

“It’s linked to emotions, the very energy of determination, and, dare I say it, love.”

Alfred actually fell upon hearing it, not seeming as convinced.

“Are you serious?” He seemed insulted.

“It’s just like using any other creation spell. Imagine them well in your head and let it appear, but it’s only more efficient if you connect it to your actual emotions.”

“Really, just like that?”

“It worked well enough for me."

“Then show me yourself.”

Ludwig groaned but agreed. To Feliciano’s surprise, Ludwig turned towards him, a sudden determination in his eyes that drove his own forward to that intense blue. Out of nowhere, Feliciano suddenly became a main focus, an only, a lover, and the arising Queen let himself be taken and mixed with the sudden appearance of deep emotions between them.

“Don’t use your power,” Ludwig suddenly warned, before taking deep breaths, closed his eyes momentarily and offered his empty hand to Feliciano.

He was confused, but then saw before him as a red light began to glow, Ludwig’s fingers seeming to sow energy around him, moving downward with a glowing creation of a simple rose. Feliciano was perplexed, staring with fascination, a gasp escaping once the creation was done.

A simple rose indeed, but with the petals made out of pure rubies, shinning like a true treasure to be showcased. Too beautiful it stood that Feliciano was rather intimidated to be so close to it, but Ludwig actually dared offer it. Feliciano looked up to him once again, his ever common strict, maddened and intense eyes, using a lot of force of his facial emotions so it could remain as so. It was unreadable to Feliciano and he could only understand that he was to hold it when Ludwig forced it upon his grip.

“See." He turned once again to Alfred.

“Got it!” He gave him a sure thump up, determined to learn it this way, but still kept the books. He was still confused about many things concerning creation spells and would need them.

“Very well, I assume you’ll finish quicker and deal with other business. Feliciano, you should be working with festival preparations as soon as you can. Kiku will need your help,” he ordered.

“Yes, your highness.” Feliciano even gave a bow as he had learned.

“Don’t fail me!” And with one last glare he turned to leave, door shut behind him, the ruby rose still in his Queen’s hold.

Awkward silenced reined above them as they stared on to the exit, both trying to believe what just occurred.

“You actually tell Ludwig ‘your highness’?” Alfred asked.

“…yeah,” Feliciano gazed down to the rose rather sweetly, finger tracing a soft petal.

“Right after he made you something like that?”

“Mhm.” Feliciano was too distracted with the flower to really elaborate on his answer.

“You Heartians are really weird,” Alfred commented before giving his full attention to a reading.

Feliciano stayed with a sway, looking like he was beginning a dance with the rose, a sudden high of feelings that made him forget easily any hurt that always arose whenever he was with Ludwig.

Nothing, he had continued to say to himself, but it was hard to say now when he had a wonderfully crafted ruby rose Ludwig made right before him, after he had explained how emotions played well into creating them. He could have just done it to get it over with, Feliciano a simple excuse, but his gaze returned to the flower and this time he kept telling himself: No, there really is something, there really is hope, a part of him must still feel love as he once had.

Chapter End Notes

EDITED: 29.10.2024

Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

> Sorry for the delay, but things at my university had driven me mad, and just today it has pissed me off more than any other. Still, I managed to write! I'll still be slow with updates, so please continue to be patient and I hope you enjoy this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Guys! I fucked up!" Was the loud shout along with the sudden crash of their room door opening that had awakened both Ludwig and Feliciano.

Despite how this was usually an hour that Ludwig would be waking up at, it was not the way he wished it to be, groaning along with Feliciano as they tried to sit up and clear their vision from sleep.

"What happened, Alfred?" Feliciano asked, tired voice, stretching and trying to focus his view to see where the floor was.

"Please don't tell me you had one of the cooks quit," Ludwig said as he picked a long and loose white buttoned shirt that he had prepared for the day.

"No! But I think it's best if you come and see for yourselves!"

And so they did, still in their sleep wear for Alfred was insisted that they went that very moment. He led them forward to the room that had been his and Arthur's for their stay, tightly shut, Alfred hesitant to open it. Ludwig and Feliciano stood side by side as they waited, annoyed about Alfred reaching and retreating his hold from the doorknob.

"Please show us already," Ludwig commanded.

"Okay, okay, but please, don't react too loudly, Arthur hasn't seen it yet."

And finally he opened and pushed them all in, shutting it quickly and laying himself upon the door, barricading from letting others enter and see.

Ludwig and Feliciano had expected the worst: a burning fire, a vortex, or no room at all. Instead, they met with a burst of beautiful colors, all lively, decorated well around all the room in the form of large, very large, flowers. It didn't stop at chamomiles, lilacs and roses, but there were daisies, sunflowers, lilies, and even orchids. Their petals glistened in many gems, intensified by the rays of the sun as it rose upon the room. It was as beautiful as a garden, even more so, Feliciano coming deep into the room as he took it all, rotating to take every detail, every new flower, not a space shown mercy from this attack. The scent was

delightful and it was enough for Feliciano to think about asking the servants to bring a table so they could have breakfast here.

“What did you do?” Ludwig asked after he did his own gazing with the same wonder Feliciano held…but still, it was a huge extreme, there were flowers the size of the bed and there were even ones in the bathroom. It was still property damage!

“Okay, so, I was practicing the creation spells, and I decided to follow your advice of mixing my emotions with it, but I think I really overdid it, and well," he expanded his arms to all around him.

“Alfred, it’s absolutely wonderful,” Feliciano complimented with his still awe.

“Well thanks, at least.” He still seemed pretty annoyed.

“No really, it is, it’s more than just some bouquet. Oh, I’m sure Arthur will love it!” He already skipped in his spot with excitement.

And suddenly Alfred found the liking, staring around him and finally realizing that this could indeed work. He managed to create an entire garden of jeweled flowers, bewitching, unlike anything the arising Queen of Spades had seen. A simple tea table with music from the festival would make it the ideal that would surely have Arthur falling and seeing that Alfred’s magic did have potential, as well as a sign of the coming peace he wanted between the people of their kingdom. He was starting to watch everything with the splendor Feliciano saw it in, for once feeling heavy pride lay over it. He created this, he created this fueled by his growing feelings for Arthur. How lovelier could it get? How more romantic?

“Um…” Ludwig suddenly interrupted.

“What is it?” Feliciano asked.

“Arthur is coming,” he warned, gazing down the hall from the door.

“No!” Alfred shouted.

“We can’t let him see this yet!” Feliciano defended.

“How do you expect to hide it? This is his room!”

“This is a big castle! We can give them another one!”

Before Ludwig could deny Feliciano, the arising Queen pushed them both out, shushing the door behind them tightly. It was easily suspicious for when Arthur arrived, who looked curiously expecting them to easily explain.

“Arthur! It’s such a lovely morning, isn’t it?” Feliciano distracted, coming close and taking his hands in a loving hold.

“It is."

“Wouldn’t you like to spend it with me helping with festival preparation!” Feliciano tried to convince him, beginning to move him away, but Arthur was stronger and easily turned back, swiftly away from the sudden hold Feliciano had on him.

“As lovely as that sounds right now, I would prefer to stay in my room for the rest of the morning. I’ll be sure to aid you once I’m done with my most recent book.”

“Ah, come on Artie, staying in there? Do some action and help Feli!” Alfred defended now the entrance, standing in his way.

“I’ve done enough action this morning practicing my spell as you should be doing as well,” he took the time to scold.

“Trust me, I’ve done enough,” Alfred whispered under his breath.

“What was that?” Arthur wanted to hear him clearly.

“Arthur,” Ludwig suddenly interrupted, a stance of order even in his sleep wear. “I have to agree with them, it’s a beautiful morning and it should be used. We really need hands in the festival preparations, so we would greatly appreciate your presence and effort there.”

The sense of duty was just enough for Arthur to stand uncaring to the door, thinking it through and suddenly finding it very validating.

“I suppose you’re right,” he sighed, knowing that his rest would have to wait. This must be important enough to have even the arising King in his pajamas on his doorsteps.

“Great! Then come on, let’s have some breakfast so we can head off as soon as possible.” Alfred grabbed his own arising Queen by the arm and led him down the halls.

“I already had breakfast!”

“Then you’ll have some more!”

The hall echoed with their continuing bickering, Ludwig and Feliciano standing behind as they finally watched them take a turn and disappear. They both took a breath of relief, quite ready to fall down and take rest on those very floors. Sadly it was a time everyone in the castle expected them up, and so reluctantly they would have to start with the day.

“I’ll have servants work on what is needed to get them a new room,” Ludwig told Feliciano, then deciding to head off as well.

“Thanks,” Feliciano said before he kept on moving.

It halted the prince and he looked back puzzled. “For what?”

“For helping to stall so Arthur wouldn’t go in. I didn’t expect you would, so really, thank you.”

And there was that smile, glowing along with the new rays of coming sun that came into the hall. Ludwig wanted to scold his heart for the sudden acceleration it took and he had turned away briskly before Feliciano noticed the dusting of red on his face.

“I don’t like meddling with such personal matters, but it is for the wellbeing of their kingdom. I only did what I little could do to help Alfred.” He nodded and truly this time went his way, not letting anything stop him with his plans for the day.

He left Feliciano alone to smile.

“-lassen Sie das Augusta Musik Festival beginnen!”

The voice echoed loudly in the square, with fireworks, drum rolls and even confetti exploding in its proclamation. Loud cheers followed, music began and the city became alive with more movement than usual, all to the dance of the festival that gave the surroundings a new glow, a wonderful one that Feliciano was glad he had the chance to look above it all from the large frontal balcony of the music hall.

He was requested to wear one of his rich wears for the day, a suit in silk velvet, embroidered in gold and silver with damasks of their kingdom. Seals, ribbons and even a red flower crown were added, showing off his status of arising, recent works and achievements. The rest of the royals were as equally dressed, along with the rest of the population, looking like another rich ball at the castle.

Once the initial crowds dispersed enough to create space, the King and Queen gave all the permission to go on ahead and enjoy as they wanted, and Feliciano wasted no time.

In the main music square, a presentation from the city orchestra played, a beautiful melody that halted many, even Feliciano to stare and listen, something so grand that it made him lost sight of what it was that he wanted to do. He stayed for the rest, already the stars and moon settling above them, but in no means had it meant that the festival was at calm.

Now…what was it that he was supposed to do?

As he gazed to the kiosks that were selling instruments, music sheets, books, snacks or other artisanal works of their kingdom, he found the presence of his arising King walking by those very stalls, gazing intently to all the items as if he was inspecting each and every one of them.

You had three types of reactions to Ludwig’s presence; there were the ones who bowed and greeted him kindly, to which the prince ignored or simply nodded to. There were those who were scared or intimidated, and would run pass without even letting their eyes meet. And finally there were the sellers, who were desperate for large amounts of gold from the prince, raising their prices and begging for him to take a look at whatever they had to offer.

Ludwig moved past them without a care, ignoring even if he was right in front of their stall. He was alone, no servant, friend or family member at his side. He didn’t strike conversation with anyone and moved rather soulless down the sidewalk. Feliciano didn’t want to leave him

like this, he wanted to give him that company, he wanted to give him the chance to enjoy this festival as one would with family or friends. He found himself moving closer to him, both taking a look to the white silks the stall before them had. They were embroidered beautifully with flowers, treats, Hearts or other kingdom's symbols.

"They're lovely aren't they," Feliciano complimented gently, but it still startled the other, no matter the strict composure he tried to keep.

"Ye-yes they are," he said back, although he avoided his gaze.

"Are you going to buy one?" Feliciano found himself asking.

Ludwig hesitated, "I-I'm not sure."

Feliciano only hummed, taking his time to look around, but Ludwig's eyes stayed where he last left them, obviously trying to avoid meeting with Feliciano. The arising Queen wanted to groan, but left him as he was.

"There's some other market stalls in Emelrich square and down Vico street, if you're interested." He was still polite, smiling and hoping to…initiate something, but Ludwig refused to continue with anything else, much to the pain in his heart.

"All right," was Ludwig's only answer, taking one of the fabrics into his hands to touch, to keep distracting himself from staring to his arising Queen.

Feliciano, from the corner of his eyes spotted who he at first had been looking for, both the figures walking side by side, heading to one of the hidden squares where a band was meant to play something traditionally Greek. They spoke and although Herakles kept extending his hand as if expecting something from the arising Jack, Kiku refused it, looking elsewhere, pointing to something, forgetting of such a chance and continuing normally through the festival. Feliciano kept still, hoping that both wouldn't notice him, which became easier when Ludwig was doing absolutely nothing and pretending like he wasn't even there.

"I…I hope you continue to enjoy the festival, bye." Feliciano gave a sheepish wave and settled himself between the crowds, following the other couple to the hidden square. He only momentarily turned back to see Ludwig still stranded in the same place, with the same strong gaze on the fabric, although his hold became stronger, to the point that he had to drop it before it broke. He then continued another way, on no specific goal. Feliciano told himself to forget about it and ignore him, just as he had done, just as always, no matter gifts of ruby roses. He tried to clear his eyes and hold himself from any further sadness.

He was going to stay attentive to his mission.

The small square that Herakles and Kiku took as their hideaway was tight, but luckily only a few tables were prepared and only few took their seats waiting for the presentation to begin. Herakles and Kiku took a table for themselves in a good corner where they could forget of the large crowds, pretend they were alone and listen to some lovely music. Feliciano tried to make his way closer to them, as secretive as possible, trying to mend himself with the dark walls despite the bright reds, silvers and golds on his clothing. Some went on with their own

conversations, but some spotted the arising Queen, staring incredulously and wondering what he was exactly doing. They didn't question long enough or pointed directly for Herakles and Kiku to notice, luckily.

Feliciano settled himself behind a tall rose bush, away from the mess of people, close enough to hear the conversation clearly, and hide just perfectly. Away from the eyes of Herakles and Kiku he was, but not from the little girl who easily took notice of him. Feliciano spotted her and waved, recognizing her. Her eyes were enough to vocalize her curiousness, but Feliciano didn't tell her more but to hush. He raised his finger comically to his mouth, and the girl did the same, as a sort of promise that she will remain quiet.

Feliciano then peeked to their conversation, about old clock towers, suggesting that they should have programmed them to play music for the duration of the festival. It was cut with the beginning of the show, traditional Greek folk music playing. It was created by a small band, just enough for the small stage, but the music was splendid. Even in his hiding spot, Feliciano found himself clapping along to it, Herakles and Kiku joined as well, compliments thrown. Herakles told Kiku that music similar to this was regularly played in his own island, hinting that he should come along to see it himself with him. Feliciano noticed Kiku blushed at the implications, but yet he remained quiet, ignorant to his words, to the advancements of his hands trying to reach his own, or even as it lay behind him on the chair. Kiku tried to move far from it, even if it was to his liking, even if he reddened, but he kept denying himself, a struggle that Herakles began to see. To better ail him, he began to stop, but Feliciano could tell he was getting hurt by it, wishing that there was something he could do for the person that at first had been so accepting about these approaches. Feliciano wished there was a way that he could push the situation for Kiku to fall into as he wanted, without the weight of his position holding him back. But the show was over soon, louds claps from the crowd, Herakles and Kiku's weak, clearly a saddened couple compared to the rest who seemed energized and ready to see much more of the festival.

Kiku didn't take the usual train back to the castle, but instead continued down the festival with Herakles, admiring some work an artist had placed, a small musical made by a pre-school group about a Grecian hero, and they had some drinks from those a cart was offering. They journeyed deeper and deeper until they found a lonely fountain they could take a rest on and finish their drink. It was silent and still, and Feliciano had to be careful that not even his breaths could be heard as he hid in one of the dark tunnels that led to it.

"These drinks are supposed to be warm," Herakles commented as he finished his glass.

"Germans usually prefer this cold," Kiku told him, not seeming to mind it.

"It's not the same. When you come to Greece, you should have a real Tsipouro."

Kiku didn't respond and Herakles settled with watching the sky above them, disappointed by the lack of stars compared to other more rural areas of the kingdom.

"What's the most you miss from Japan?" Herakles suddenly asked, a question that for once had Kiku really thinking about back to his own province.

He had been too busy dealing with his work in Germany to really think about the things he lost in his move. He tried to preserve what he could in his actions in the castle, his room, the food the cooks made for him, his clothing, and decorating even the Jack's study in things he brought. But like the Tsipouro they drank, it wasn't enough, and there were things that still remained with his family back in the island with no way to reciprocate in the mainland.

"We would be here all night if I started."

Herakles laughed, leaning slightly closer, his hand meeting with Kiku in a slight touch.

"We have it," he said, with a shine in his eyes that had Kiku's breath faltering, staring into them as he tried to find the words for what he had asked. He had to shut his eyes, look about and let his mind order itself, yet his hand took a loving hold of the Greek's hand, which had Herakles smirking, leaning and waiting for Kiku to start.

Kiku finally managed the words, going on with how he missed the blossom trees, the sound of footsteps across their kind of woodened floors, their kind of tranquility, his mother's miso soups, rice and salmon, his father's training, and even his collection of rich crafted katana swords.

"You collect katana swords?" Herakles said astounded, even Feliciano was surprised from his hidden corner.

"I do. I have always been interested in that kind of martial art we use with it. I am skilled with them as any warrior."

Feliciano did not expect that from such a calm and composed man.

"Why didn't you bring any? You could have taught me something!"

"My father said it was unbecoming for a Jack and insisted that they stayed back in Japan."

"You're the Jack of Hearts, you should have done what you wanted and brought them anyway! You have more power than your father could ever want!"

"He is still my father and I wished not to disobey him, and I don't wish to disobey my position either. A Jack shouldn't misuse of his position for the pleasure of himself."

Herakles didn't know how he could deny, thinking it over as he continued to gaze to the stars, noticing that Kiku hadn't let go of his hand, now gentle, loving as they rubbed their fingers together.

"I haven't known you for long, but from what I had gotten to, even if you were given a chance of full reign with no control over what you could do, I don't think you would ever misuse it in such a way, you would still do what is best for your kingdom, but I think you should also find happiness for yourself. It is as needed as the King and Queen's, and you should try to aim for it no matter." He smiled and Kiku was glad that he had that kind outlook of himself, which earned him another grasp of their hands, even letting his other hand join in his hold, moving forward and inching them ever closer.

There was a dear look as they beheld each other, a beautiful place, quiet, romantic, a scene come alight before Feliciano. Kiku raised their hands and found himself kissing them and Herakles raised a hand to caress at the side of his hair and face, with its pull inching them both closer. Lost they were in their gazes that they didn't even notice the proximity of their lips, breaths joining, Herakles's hands now on the arising Jack's arms and waist, Kiku's on his lap.

Suddenly they became shaken, struck with a thought that pulled the arising Jack away, moving his head aside, breaking the magic that had suddenly formed between them. "I really…shouldn't," he whispered.

"Why not?" Herakles whispered back, as seductively waiting for a return of what they just had.

"I shouldn't…disobey my position," was his answer, serious composure returned, not giving another chance for the other, who had to nod, move back, and give him the space he wanted. "It's late…I should be returning back to the castle."

"Uh…yes, yes, of course. I'll accompany until you wish."

"Thank you."

They began to stand and fix themselves, and that is when Feliciano decided to rush back himself before they caught him.

The festiveness had died down for the night as Feliciano made his return, to the somber and dark halls of night in the castle, as his thoughts as he continued to think about Kiku's predicament.

How could the very person who gave him the push to disobey the Queen and make the last ball as his own, still be as imposing to himself as to deny such a chance of a beautiful romance because of an elder law? Why couldn't Kiku fight against it? Why couldn't he help him in his insisting to change this law once he was at command? He kept telling himself that he should really start reading books, pamphlets and old documents about this as he had earlier promised, but being distracted with Alfred and Arthur drove him away from it.

He should have expected royalty to be this hard, to be this imposing and reckoning no matter the feelings of the rulers. He hated how they had to succumb and accept, how they had to let it control their feelings, and how the rest of their personal lives were to be dictated by rituals and the same elder laws that cause Kiku's current predicament, that bind Feliciano to what would perhaps be a loveless marriage, and a life of political seriousness and order that he had never felt he could fit into, not even with his grandfather's past teachings or the ones he currently had with the Queen. It angered him, it saddened him, he wanted his steps to smash unto the palace tiles.

As he came closer to his room, a sudden melody he recognized stopped him, instantly working its usual magic of settling and serenity.

He knew it was the sound of his music box, but he knew well that it only played unless it was opened by himself. Did he leave it playing before he left to the festival? Was a servant listening perhaps? He only opened the door to his room slightly in suspicion, preparing his voice to scream for if it was an intruder.

The room was in its usual dim glow, only but a single light in the middle table between Ludwig and Feliciano's bed, just enough for Ludwig as he held the small chest in his hands, looking to it with admirable care, but also with a broken expression that showed grieving sadness.

Feliciano didn't know how to respond to this, he only stared on, thinking that he was surely in a dream, the ones in which he found himself moving closer in simple steps, wanting to offer him comfort, an embrace, a kiss. The image stayed, he could feel the warmth of the light, the song of the chest continuing and clear. Ludwig was so lost in the melody he didn't notice as Feliciano reached the edge of their beds. Feliciano didn't want to break his concentration, remaining silent and still, noticing that Ludwig's face remained in the same expression, gentile and soft for once, all until it ended.

"You recognize the song don't you?" Feliciano suddenly asked, greatly startling Ludwig.

Ludwig jumped, throwing the chest midair. Luckily, he quickly held it back in his hold safely, as precious as Feliciano usually held it. Feliciano smiled, not even minding that Ludwig was actually taking seat in his own bed.

"It's nice isn't it?" Feliciano asked in his ever friendly manner, inviting and not at all minding of what he had caught Ludwig doing.

The arising King was still as alarmed, panicked, trying to find quick ways to calm and find an excuse, but he knew none would be sufficient enough. He was sitting on his arising Queen's bed, the chest tight in his hands, and the song had been playing long enough for Feliciano to listen to as well. As a way to diverse the situation, he stood and threw over the chest to Feliciano, trying to pretend he was uncaring to it. But Feliciano saw as he turned back, relieved once he had seen that the other had caught it safely.

"It is nice," he admitted, going to his side of the room, preparing to sleep. "Accept to be mine, if I'm not mistaken."

"Mhm, um…" Feliciano suddenly grew nervous, for Ludwig's voice was still cold, and he was afraid that he would say something cruel if he continued. "It-It is, you have to remember it, we-we used to-"

"Sing and dance to it. I know. It used to be our song. Not a day passed that we didn't keep people up at night or create messes as we took any floor to dance it on." Ludwig wanted to laugh, but he held it in a breath, distracting himself by continuing to prepare the bed.

Sometimes Feliciano thought that he had completely forgotten about all that, so hearing this brought incredible warmth as he held the box unto his chest.

“I wish…” Feliciano found himself starting, his composure turning glum, eyes looking away to a distant memory. “I wish it could be like that again…” he finally let it out, trembling now as he watched Ludwig completely still, dropping the blankets on the bed, looking forward only to the ceiling or walls as if to hold himself from saying something.

“Do you know about Augusta?” He suddenly asked, not at all going with what Feliciano had just said.

It caught the other completely by surprise, thoughts then turning to the important figure. “Romulus’s wife, she’s one of my great grandmothers,” he answered surely.

“Is that all?” Ludwig turned to him, expecting to hear more.

Feliciano’s expression fell as he tried to recall something else other than the fact that Romulus loved her immensely, created the song with him, and there was a music festival going right now in her name. He flattened, feeling disappointed in himself for not knowing enough about one of his important ancestors. All they talked about in the Valenti household was about Romulus.

Ludwig sighed disappointedly, yet looked elsewhere in understanding, so he didn’t become as harsh as Feliciano was expecting.

“Just go to sleep,” he decided.

“But-”

“Go to sleep, Feliciano!” He was turned, on the bed, draped in his blankets before his arising Queen could say anything else.

Feliciano wanted to keep insisting, to the point that he was just about to shake Ludwig awake. But even turned and seeming asleep, Ludwig gave off this threatening aura that it was best Feliciano moved away from.

He went off to the closet to get his night clothes and later jumped on the bed to prepare his own way to sleep. The chest was still tight in his own hold, but for tonight he placed it over at the bedside table, forgotten for his thoughts were too busy with other things.

Why mention Augusta all of a sudden? Did she have to do with something? Feliciano was never really told anything else about her, but his mind roamed in curiosity of what she had been, of what she could mean.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

> I’m finally done with this semester! Which means more time to write! But things might go wild being Christmas and all, plus also working on other multichapters and a gerita sugar daddy AU thing (Yes).There’s also Going out with family, and trips, and other things. So as always be patient! I hope you enjoy this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Feliciano wished he could go out with everybody else to the continuing days of the festival. The schedule was plentiful with an array of beautiful things, but he missed it all to spend it in the stuffiness of the Queen’s library and study room.

He leafed, he read, he threw, making messes that would get Louis scolding loudly and basically throwing him out, thus he would end at the Jack’s library and study room when the ruler was busy with the festival as well. He was more careful there, as to not leave any trace, but always bringing with him an old pamphlet here and there that he would read carefully through the nights.

He went through old marriage documents, of past Kings and Queens, and of course Jacks. In the process, he found out that King Romulus and Queen Augusta’s was on display in the castle in the Queen’s tower. He rushed to see it, the document brown, hazed, and ink slowly fading from the centuries it held. As he read, there was nothing there that could help him, but his eyes remained of what it said about Augusta. Just the same thing that most documents read: the contract, the vows, and their signatures as promise of the devotion they were to show. Augusta had her own peculiar signature as any other Queen, but nothing new, nothing he could take, nothing that could give him a hint. He turned and went back on his mission, completely ignoring a special symbol that had been imprinted on the document.

He put all the most important books and documents before him on a large table in one of the study rooms, a small notebook in his hands to write the things he had found out. Looking at how many they were, and what he was supposed to do, he tried to hold himself from getting a headache, and started with the notes he had gotten on the first line of books. In his search, he found out that most documents concerning an arranged marriage of a Jack and another dignitary stopped before the ruling of King Iolanda. Here, Feliciano found out that many of the people that the Jack married were of different backgrounds, from mere peasants to even prince or princesses from their kingdom or others. There was no contract of family members or past Kings and Queens uniting them. So what happened during King Iolanda’s reign that changed all that?

King Iolanda ruled two generations after Romulus, the kingdom still in reconstruction after the damages of the wars of the Blackened Decades. A lot of changes were brought over and

because of those very wars that occurred for them only years ago, their whole law set was changed in order to get the kingdom quickly back on its feet. That's when he found the document binding the Jack of the time, Humbert Beutel, to a Clubian princess to start a strong trade between the kingdoms and a fix of the lands given to Clubs from the remains of the Dark Kingdom.

Those times were long over, and he knew from his apprenticeship to the Queen that the kingdom was doing excellently well without such strong unions to other Kingdoms.

That's when he remembered a special document signed well after the ends of the reconstruction, four generations after Romulus. Feliciano remembered being well taught about it by his grandfather. The actual document was in the Club Kingdom, but he was sure that a copy must be here in the Hearts Kingdom.

It was in the King's library and study room, and Feliciano had gone a late night, quietly and quick, for he was in no ways accepted to be there unless he was finally crowned Queen, and even so he could only go in with special permission from the King. To his luck it hadn't been lock, there was no presence in the room, but it had been dark to the point that Feliciano had to use a light spell to make his way and find it.

Like the Queen and Jack's libraries and study rooms, many of the most important documents of the kingdom were hanged across the walls, but seeing as the King's was the largest and the documents were much larger as well, it took a while for Feliciano to find it located on the third floor.

As old and rusted as the rest of the documents, it read many agreements of terminal trades or continuous ones, the taking of laws or adding, and other finalized things that settled a good reestablishment and peace between all four of the kingdoms, putting an end to the reconstruction. The signatures of all the rulers that had to do with it were large, easily distracting one from the reading the smaller things that were imprinted.

Feliciano decided that he would look well for anything it said about the Jack, since so many things were written in tiny letters. He took a small latter to stand up and look as well as he wanted, still having to tiptoe whenever he had to read something that became smaller. Around the midsection he found a paragraph specifically meant for changes to occur to the Jack. From hence they were symbols of medical services in the kingdom, they insisted them to be present in the birth of heirs, there was a code for them to read having to do with their powers and Feliciano ignored the rest, until finally he got to one of the last points.

'Arrange marriage laws are no longer necessary, yet the King or Queen is in charge of deciding whether to let it remain or be annulled'

Feliciano gave a celebrated whispered, "yes!" And a small little jump. He landed wrong and fell down to the floor creating a large echo in the room. Surely anyone who was close by was bound to hear and so Feliciano quickly picked himself up and ran out through another door, hoping he could find his way back to his room without getting lost in this new path of the castle.

With further investigation, Feliciano found out that most Kings and Queens remained with the law simply because of the extra riches they earned, and as they became more classists, to avoid marriages to those of lower status and letting them stay in the castle. It made no sense, since there was a vast record of Kings, Queens, and Jacks who were chosen yet as commoners. Romulus himself was an orphaned boy with no nobility background whatsoever.

They had enough riches, and ever since the last ball the castle had been more open about who could enter. There was no point to leave this law, and the Jack deserved his own choosing at who he or she could be with and marry.

Feliciano was decided, he had the papers, he had information, he would talk with Queen Louis to already begin making the proper process to annul the law to have it gone as soon as he took the throne.

Despite missing the entire festival, finding this information, and assuring Kiku's happiness in one aspect of his life was well worth it. At least he would be there for the last day, where one last feast was to be presented right before the castle. He was obliged to come and he presented himself well with a red jacket ornamented in gold threadwork, the blouse underneath loose with a simple cravat, golden choker and necklaces, tight cream pants, and long black boots.

Kiku cooed once he saw him enter into his room just as he was finishing with his own preparations, his ever rich red robes crafted with beautiful golden and red symbols of his province. He wasn't alone. The very Jack was in a corner dealing with some scrolls surely about some work Kiku would have to do as soon as the festival was over.

Perfect, he should know as well.

"Handsome as ever, Feliciano," Kiku complimented.

"And you shine better than a diamond, Kiku," Feliciano complimented as well, even offering a bow. Kiku chuckled but quickly requested that Feliciano stood again.

"I'm sure you'll have Herakles swaying when he sees you."

The Jack glared at Kiku momentarily from his inspections and Kiku tensed. "Feliciano, I don't think now is the right time."

"Of course it's the right time! It's the last day of the festival, right before the castle, music from a wonderful orchestra, a beautiful starry night, banquets, fireworks. Oh, I wish I could be kissed in a night like this," Feliciano dreamed.

Kiku blushed and Feliciano already knew it was because he got a clear image in his head from a certain Greek. "Feliciano," Kiku groaned in between his teeth in a scold, not liking the heavy eyes of the Jack on him.

"Kiku, there's nothing wrong with having a beautiful night with someone you desire."

“It is wrong! I’m not supposed to!”

Feliciano hated the proud smirk the Jack wore at seeing Kiku finally admit it without any hesitation.

“Not anymore.” And in that moment he extended the long scroll that he had been holding behind his back.

Kiku was dubious about it, afraid to take it, of what it could have, of the discussion that could occur from it. With a shaking grasp he finally did, untying it and instantly beginning with his reading. The Jack, curious, stood and began to come close, hoping for a glimpse of what the scroll held.

The tittle, which read ‘Annulment of V. 48, Sec. 42, of the Heartian Jack Order’ was just enough.

“Would you care to explain?” The Jack told Feliciano, eager for quick responses instead of continuing to read as Kiku was doing.

“I dug a little in the marriage laws for the Jack, and found out a thing or two, especially after reading the end of reconstruction agreement.” He stood proudly, with a powerful smile, making him look mighty for once, but still a delicateness that wasn’t at all intimidating or mocking. “I spoke with Queen Louis, and after showing my findings, we both agreed that arranged marriages of the Jack for more wealth to the crown are completely unnecessary. The original law was placed merely to aid in the reconstruction process after the war of the Darkened Decades.”

“It cannot be removed so easily, the law has remained for several centuries afterwards and it has served us well,” the Jack excused, Kiku having to move away to continue to read in relative peace.

“Actually it can. The very end of the reconstruction agreement says that it can be removed easily if the King or Queen decides.” Feliciano made emphasis when he mentioned his coming tittle. “Besides, it hasn’t really served well the Kingdom, it only adds more selfish riches to the Jack. Sadly the past Jacks had tried to convince their arising Jacks to accept it just so they could enjoy from whatever is left for them.”

It seemed like Feliciano was accusing the Jack, and he was not about to stand for it.

“You’re not even the Queen! You shouldn’t be putting or annulling laws yet!” He tried to defend himself weakly.

“Actually, I cannot sign or make them official yet, but I can go through the procedure,” he assured. “Queen Louis wanted to officiate it herself instantly, but I told her to leave it off for when I take the throne. It will be the first thing I pass!” He declared, just as Kiku looked up to them after finalizing his reading. “From now on, the King and Queen, or even the past Jack, are in no ways to interfere with the arising or current Jack’s marriage or relationship proposals. The Jack can be with whoever he or she wishes, to wed or to not,” Feliciano declared loudly, with the voice of a true Queen.

Kiku couldn't hold it any longer; the smile, the rise of energy and he found himself doing something that he never thought he would ever do. With a shrill of joy, he jumped and took Feliciano into an uncommon embrace. Of course, Feliciano had no complaints or tried to even show his surprise. Instead, he enjoyed from the sweet moment, both laughing and twirling together like excited little children. The Jack only stared on as they spun on, afraid that they would trip or stumble onto something big and get hurt.

After several minutes they finally stopped, Kiku departing to look at Feliciano with the biggest smile the Jack had ever seen on him. "Oh, Feliciano, thank you, thank you, grazie, danke, arigato!" He shouted, kissing his hands, his cheeks, and taking him once again into his surprisingly strong arms. Feliciano returned it gladly, trying to make it just as powerful.

Really, they should hug each other like this more often.

They were interrupted from with a sudden knock at the door. A maid peeked her head in, bowing to them. "Your highnesses, the King and Queen have requested for your presence."

Kiku had never been more excited to go, more excited to meet with Herakles, and he was close from dragging both Feliciano and the Jack out alongside him.

"We'll be right there," Feliciano told her.

She left, and Feliciano and Kiku used one last moment before a mirror to check that everything had been all right after their great embrace. They left before the Jack could say anything else. They weren't going to let him continue to defend himself and ruin their last day of the festival.

As they hurriedly made their way down the halls, they met just in time with Alfred and Arthur making their way up.

"Aren't you both going to the festival?" Kiku questioned.

"For some reason he wants to take me elsewhere," Arthur told seeming annoyed by it.

Feliciano hid his chuckle, knowing perfectly well.

"I assure you, you're going to love it."

"I better if I'm missing the festival for this."

"Trust me Arthur, you will," Feliciano helped assure.

It got a curious gaze from Arthur, but Alfred was pulling him forward quicker down the hall before he could ask.

"What are they going to do?" Kiku asked once they disappeared.

"It doesn't matter, we should be getting to the festival instead," Feliciano distracted, letting both continue as they had earlier.

The festival was at its heights. Everyone who couldn't during the week came, busying the streets even more and bringing it with more splendor as they all came out with their best wear. There was so much activity and movement, a song to hear, a dance to join, food to have, games to play, that absolutely no one had an excuse to just stand and watch.

The commotion was too much that Feliciano had easily lost Kiku in the crowd, and he let him to meet up with Herakles, to do as he wished without the weight of what it meant to his title. It made Feliciano feel rather self-conscious of the fact that he was alone, and at this point he was rather desperate for a dance, willing to take anyone as his partner.

There was space just before the stage that held the main orchestra, the very one which the King and Queen enjoyed from and other dignitaries from the castle. As he searched for any maid or servant he knew, his eyes still landed on the lone figure of the prince, enjoying from a drink by the sides as he watched his own parents and grandparents enjoy in the array of couples that swung to the music. As usual, he looked bored, unimpressed, probably wanting this to end already.

Feliciano wasn't going to on his watch.

With unknown bravery, he came close and greeted with a: "Well, you're the most cheerful face here."

Ludwig didn't laugh, he gave a small glare, emptying his drink and thinking of taking another one. "And you seem to have nothing else to do," he commented.

"So do you. Are you really planning on staying here for the rest of the night?" Feliciano smiled rather kindly still.

"What else could I do? I lack the abilities to do anything having to do with a music festival."

"You can still try."

"Try to what?"

Feliciano gazed rather intently to the beautiful couples laughing as they extended and grazed their way across the floor.

"You can try to dance with me," he suggested with a smirk.

Ludwig almost choked on his new drink. "I rather not," he said quickly, hoping that Feliciano hadn't notice the beer running down his mouth.

"Is it because it's me-"

"It's because we shouldn't!"

"I think we should!" He took his drink and gave it to some server to take away, quickly using both his hand to pull him forward to the spinning crowd.

For some reason Ludwig was weak on trying to pull himself away, and by the time they reached the center of the space, Ludwig had given up and settled with Feliciano's sudden wanting in this. He was nervous to the point that Feliciano could feel him shaking in his hold. He was suddenly unsure as to where to put his hands, where to look, where to even stand, nothing like how he danced with him in the last ball. Then again, he had probably practiced define steps just for it, just to impress and deal with what was required of him for the night. But now he was outside at a festival, taken suddenly with cheery and casual music that was just wrong to dance in a simple waltz. It had been so long ago since the last time he actually did this properly, and he had a panicked expression, just like the ones he used to take as a kid. Yet there was Feliciano, with his ever calm, with his ever beautiful smile, welcoming even to his paralyzed stature. Noticing how Ludwig turned, he soothed him with his hands over his arms, massaging them slightly until he came to a still. Feliciano helped him place one hand on his waist, the other in the grasp of his free hand that didn't rest on his shoulder.

"Breath," he told him, and like the command of a spell Ludwig began his usual mantra until he began to ease. "Focus on the music, focus on me, don't be bothered if it's bad or not, just enjoy it." And with a confident smile, Feliciano lead them into the melody of the music, into the harmony of the festive crowd, to an exciting dance that didn't hold the spite and anger of their last.

It wasn't the best one, as Ludwig still turned shaky and grew very shy to let their eyes meet, but it was still nice, it was still a fine way to enjoy from the music and spend their time together.

As Alfred and Arthur had gotten closer, Alfred decided to place his hands over Arthur's eyes, much to his annoyance.

"Alfred, I know we're in front of our first room here," he managed to notice on their way.

"It is, but there's something in it I want you to see, something I made myself…for you."

Arthur didn't let a word escape, but Alfred could feel his sudden heat, and with a glimpse he could see that he was blushing. Arthur took a deep breath to remove it before Alfred could continue to stare.

"Keep your eyes closed." Alfred trusted that he wouldn't as he let go to open the doors, returning them to guide him into coming in. He made sure the doors were closed behind them and that all the extra preparations he had in the room were just as he had left them. "All right, you can look now," he finally said and Arthur did it slowly, to be able to get some time to prepare himself on how to react.

No time would be enough for this sudden bombing of colors, for this sudden shine, for this beauty. He had to place a hand upon his chest to calm his breathing, to not be overwhelmed by so much in a single instant.

"What-what, what is this?" Arthur asked as he came closer, then noticing the table that was prepared already with food, the windows and balcony doors open to let air dance around the

room along with the aroma. Music drifted in, and the night was starry and clear to add to the shine of the flowers, for the very jewels to try and twinkle along with the sky.

“I-I I made it,” he declared.

Arthur came near to one of the many sapphire roses, feeling it true in his touch, proving to him that it was real, and from the sense he got in the room, it was magic induced.

“You-you did? No, you-you- Feliciano and Ludwig must have helped you!” Alfred couldn’t have obtained that ability so easily. He knew how bad his magic was.

“I swear, I swear, I did,” he pleaded. “Feliciano and Ludwig did give me some help, some pointers, some advice, but all of this was by my hand and magic.” With the bravery he had prepared for this, he took his hands in his, tightly as to get Arthur focused on his words, on his truth.

“But…how?”

“Well…actually reading,” he chuckled, “and practicing, and focusing, and all these other things you always told me about, but I was an idiot to listen to.”

Arthur grinned, mostly because he liked hearing him admit that he should have listened to him.

“And…uh…” he grew nervous to say. He looked away, not standing to see Arthur’s eyes shine in a green as magical and jewel-like as the rest of the flowers they were surrounded with. But Arthur kept trying to pull him in, with magic in his eyes, one Alfred couldn’t refuse any longer, reeling himself back in it and dedicating to say the words that instant. “My-my feelings for you!” He finally admitted.

“Feelings?”

“You-you know, emotions power one’s magic, and being the arising King and all, well it kind of, doubled, and we got this, and I made this with mind on you and what you wanted and that story you’re always reading, and I had to get Ludwig to get us a new room and I was so excited for today cause I wanted to show you that I can also use magic and that-”

“Alfred, breathe, dear.”

Alfred didn’t know how when Arthur just eased him with that very sweet endearment in his enchanting accent.

“Okay, breathing.” He did so very heavily.

Arthur had to roll his eyes, but he came close, wrapping his arms around his neck and looking up to his future King with a dream state in his eyes that made Alfred wonder for a moment if he was actually dreaming.

“Relax,” Arthur told him once more, hands rubbing on his back and neck where they wrapped.

Alfred fell towards it until his breathing regulated, and he could finally look up to him to continue to say what he wanted. “I’m sorry I didn’t show properly how I really want to help our kingdom. It was just hard to when all I’ve been taught is to think uncaring to those who are not of my kind. But I’m going to change that, you’re going to change that as well, and I am going to give you all the help and voice you need to make it happen," he promised with true potential in his eyes. He leaned and placed a gentle kiss upon his forehead, taking in the blissful scent of his hair. “The Aces surely chose you to qualm the tension between the people in our kingdom, and that we will do, and I’m willing to start as soon as we return to Spades.” Arthur looked up to him, seeing the shine of determination in his eyes, in his expression, in the hold he took of his waist. “I want to be a proper King to you.” He leaned to lay his forehead with his, their breaths mingling in the temptation of closeness, but instead of giving in, they instead started in the sway of music that played loudly enough for them to move with.

They danced like they would in any ballroom, yet with a closeness not allowed into any publicity of a feast. They messed their steps, they laughed, Arthur pointed to a flower here and there, hoping he would be able to take one back to Spades. For once he enjoyed a moment with Alfred, for once he made him blush proudly to show, laugh and even his heart race without some awful pick up line or some embarrassing act. He liked this new Alfred he danced with, one with promise as to what was to come in their soon coming reign. In a single night he learned to see that he could confide in him, and that he could trust in what their relationship could turn out to be. To begin that, in a moment of a close hold, Arthur placed his lips upon his arising King’s, and it was just like the magic that Alfred tended to tie with Arthur. He kissed back, hands rubbing against the back of his neck or threading throughout his hair to make him remain there, to remain infinite in that moment.

Feliciano dragged Ludwig on their continuous dance far longer than the arising King had hoped. Yet, he still did not try to escape, he did not voice any halts, and Feliciano was actually starting to feel him become tight in his hold on him, which only proved to him more that a silent part of him wanted this to continue all the way until the orchestra would leave. No matter his nervousness, his fear, or trembling, Feliciano would sometimes catch him smiling as he realized he had gotten a certain move right.

Kiku had stared at this rather incredulously, having to rub his eyes and pinch himself to make sure he was actually seeing Ludwig dance casually with Feliciano. His sternness for a moment seemed erased and he was gentile, even enjoying it, confident in the hold he had of his arising Queen. He didn’t see angry glares between them, and their mouths didn’t word hate. There were only grins and amusement, and they continued to enjoy from it as the orchestra continued to play.

Both Herakles and Kiku were just as taken by the rhythm, and they let themselves be caressed into it just as the rest of the couples that had been participant of it. Feliciano met with them in a moment they passed by each other in a dash. They both smiled at him, of ever going thanks, of clear gratitude that they could have showed in another embrace if the arising Queen hadn’t been so busy with his own partner. Feliciano only winked to them in welcome before he dragged Ludwig to another corner just as the music had them.

By the time the orchestra finished for some last words from the King and Queen for the night, all the dancers were exhausted, looking for drinks to cool them or settling their breaths along with the King and Queen's speech. Ludwig was finally free, Feliciano giving him the space he wanted at the beginning. He looked to be in a daze, shaken by the moment and trying to find a way to place himself back in his reality. Feliciano could have laughed loud enough to dim out the words of the King and Queen.

They spoke loudly about congratulations to how excellently well the festival had come out, thanking every single one who had given a hand to create the masterpiece. When they had finished, all who were present applauded to those very men and women that made it possible, such figures bowing in thanks to the crowd. Herakles was one of them, who also ushered for Kiku to do the same, as Feliciano had done, even if his own help was small and only there for the beginning.

He suddenly thought of Alfred and Arthur, who he hoped were having a time of wonder up in the flowered room, where he looked up to, to the far balcony he knew they were in. He smiled as if they could see him in his proudness.

He was alarmed suddenly by the lighting of fireworks, bringing the sky alight in shine, in colors and forms that gained more hollers and claps from the crowd below who watched splendidly. The crowd was distracted solely on them, even Ludwig, but it wasn't enough for Feliciano to evade the sight of how Herakles took Kiku's jaw in a slow caress, to his eyes, to his lips, reflecting the lights of the sprinkling sky. With the loud boom of the biggest one, they met in their first kiss, any sound or presence forgotten as they mended with each other in the play and softness of their lips. Feliciano smiled, feeling accomplished in the double mission he had set for himself, yet he grew saddened that he had no one to share such an ending with. He looked hopeful to Ludwig, who stared to the show with a normalized expression, back to his uncaringness, back to their coldness.

If he was expecting something that moment, he was definitely not getting it.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

> This chapter holds the load of two chapters, so it's the longest one in the entire story… for now. With this chapter the fic reaches 100k ….and were not even half way done (cries). But I really hope you guys like this chapter, I really enjoyed writing it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Feliciano thought that things now had a chance to change.

Ludwig had shown to be jealous when others came too close to him. He had given him a ruby rose, which was made by a magic that needed specific power from your emotions and feelings towards a person. He caught him listening to his music box, and their last dance was actually one that he knew both of them had enjoyed.

Feliciano thought he had seen him finally crack an opening, he thought their relationship could progress, he thought there was high hope and something new to grow between them. But in the coming two months, it had been like none of that had ever happened.

Ludwig seemed to be trying harder to keep his cold composure, to ignore him the more, to be angrily commanding, scolding over any little manner, and more insisting than ever that Feliciano was calling him 'your highness'.

Those two words were beginning to be the two most he hated, a great spite in his tone whenever he mentioned them that even the servants would notice when he spoke. Every time they were together, everyone feared an argument would arise, that Ludwig would do or say something that Feliciano wouldn't be able to take and shove their dinner on his face and head.

The entire castle made sure that no dangerous weapons were at their vicinity lately, but then they would remember that they still had their powerful magic. They just hoped they wouldn't awake one morning to find the castle burned to a crisp because the arising King and Queen couldn't handle one of their recent quarrels.

Six months in the castle and in no way did it seem that Ludwig was any near to becoming the husband Feliciano had hoped for.

With only six months left for his coronation, he had been given heavy loads of work, getting more and more used to the schedule and laboring of a Queen. It didn't help when Ludwig was not being helpful at all, commenting on the slightest thing he was doing wrong and talking down at him as if he was just another mere servant in the castle or even a lost child that even with six months of experience did not understand what he was doing.

No, even the servants in the castle and the children were treated better than this.

Another ball was being prepared, and Feliciano was grateful for it. A ball to distract him, to relax, and to hopefully spend as much time away from Ludwig with the good friends he had made in the city. He had hoped to help Queen Louis with the preparations, so he had come to the study room with great excitement, just as she was working on special invitations. They were stamped with some high seals with directions to the other kingdoms.

“Who are those for?” Feliciano had asked, as he took one and saw a symbol Heartians gave to those of Diamonds.

“For the other Kings and Queens, or arising ones. Their presence is usually required in these kinds of balls,” she said as she moved about checking papers, signing and organizing.

“What kind of ball is this going to be?” He asked, hoping to catch a peek with the papers she was working on.

She picked them up, stood and moved elsewhere before he could see. She gave out a teasing smirk, a playful look in her eyes as she thought about the best way she could hint this. “It’s a surprise for you, dear,” she decided with, moving to get some things from one of the book shelves.

“But if I’m going to help you, shouldn’t I know?”

“Definitely not!” She scolded, Feliciano thinking that she was to hit him with a scroll she had just picked up. “Feliciano, the last ball you made was absolutely wonderful, but this particular one should be completely under my hand. It’s the last one I’m organizing before I step down.” She saddened and Feliciano instantly understood. He just wished he could comfort her with a hug, but she was so insisting with her current working that she didn’t give him the space or even the time.

“Is there anything I can still do?”

She thought about it for some time before she decided. She took out two envelopes, one meant to be sent to Italy, the other to Iberia, and handed it to the young Queen. “You’ll be happy to know that your family is invited to come, so why don’t you find messengers to deliver these and I’ll let you decide which room they can stay in for their visit.”

It indeed made him excited, instantly a smile sprouting into his face, jumping with thrill as he took the envelopes with the directions to his old home and Antonio and Lovino’s house. Feliciano had missed them dearly.

“This makes me more than happy! I’ll send them immediately and choose the rooms right now.” He dashed out of the room like a hyper child, earning a chuckle from the Queen.

With him gone, now she could send the commands for the ballroom that was to be chosen, and that was the finest in the castle, the one with the glass dome at the top sphere.

Feliciano had separated three rooms, and just before the Queen decided on the ones meant for the other royals that were to come. He had been too enthusiastic with his family's visit to question the visit of other royals, to question the heavy preparations that started for the ball, more so than the last one he had made. Servants were hurrying and nervous with great action just the day before it, just the day the Valenti were set to arrive. Feliciano had to hurry his way down through loads of servants carrying heavy items, cleaning, and even adorning the castle with new banners and flags. His interest was vague, it was practically nonexistent to this excessive decorating, just as the simple way he was dressed, which as he thought about longer, would get him a scold from his grandfather and mother. But he didn't care, they could pretty much disown him if they wanted, but he just wanted to see them again, wanted to hug them, kiss them, speak, eat and drink, and somehow be given the time they had taken away from each other.

He skipped and jumped to make his way faster, arriving to the entrance just as they were arriving. Servants were already there to help with the luggage the coach had brought, and were currently trying to convince Renata that she didn't need to help them. She was a guest to the royal castle and should be treated as such, but the woman kept insisting.

"Mamma!" Feliciano called.

Whatever discussion she had with the servants dropped all completely.

"Mio bambino bello!" She called practically on the brink of tears.

They both ran to each other and crashed into a hard embrace, that was filled of cuddling, of kisses, of arms cradling the other, swinging, and seeming never ending. The servants, who had never met Renata before, stared dumbfounded at the incredible likeliness she had to the arising Queen. They continued to fill the air with laughter and speed talking Italian filled with countless endearments, of I miss you and you look absolutely stunning. They only detached each other when Antonio and Lovino came close, who Feliciano jumped on just as he had done to his mother. The little group of only four was already talkative, seeming to rush their experience of six months in a wording of seconds. They just continued to impress the servants more and they had almost forgotten about the two figures that were still left in the coach.

A heavy groan from one of them was the only voice that managed to interrupt this loud reunion, Feliciano instantly recognizing it and running over to greet it. He stopped midway when he noticed the way this person coughed, how he needed his father's help to get down, how he bended and it seemed a great effort to just stand as the proud soldier he had once been.

"Feliciano!" He still wanted to greet as strongly as ever, opening his arms to him and expecting his crashing.

A gaze from his father told him that he shouldn't be as aggressive with it, but Feliciano couldn't help it, not when Augusto's arms became just as tightening, as familiar, a chest that he could cradle into and hope he could be strong enough to not let tears stain his nice vest.

He had only been away for six months, it shouldn't be enough for his grandfather to look the age he actually was, for him to suddenly look so sickened. What had happened? He wondered, detaching to look into his same golden brown eyes, the same smile, the same life no matter.

"Mi sei mancato così tanto!" Feliciano told him, bringing him to another embrace, this time his walls not strong enough to let out the whimpering, the small tears that reached his eyes.

"Non piangere! Non piangere! Mio bambino, non piangere!" He caressed his hair and back, cradling him like he was still that small baby from long ago.

They all turned to give Feliciano a pat and a close watch that Augusto could continue to hold him without the problem of his weight. Distracted they had been to notice the coming of another figure, watching the scene and waiting for a good moment in which he could make his presence known. Renata had turned momentarily, wondering over the person who was given them heavy eyes. She had thought it had been Aldrich, but as she properly stared, both her eyes and mouth had widened.

"Ludwig?" She instantly questioned.

He bowed on his spot in assurance, a welcoming smile that was just enough to drag Renata in his closeness, having to reassure herself constantly with her eyes that this was in fact the little German boy that used to visit the Valenti manor constantly, Feliciano's dear best friend, a boy that she herself had helped to raise like another mother.

"Signora Valenti, it's been so long, you haven't changed in the slightest, as beautiful as I remember," he told her kindly.

Renata was still paralyzed in her spot. He had grown taller than herself, a strong build, a mature face, no trace of the child she once knew. At least he was still respectable to her, a familiar smile, and she just couldn't keep leaving this distance between them.

"Oh, Ludwig, look at you!" She opened her arms and he easily accepted the joining, an embrace like that of a mother and son. "You grew up so much! But my, are you handsome. Not that young infant prince anymore, you shine like a true King," she admitted, kissing his forehead and letting both her hands caress at this new defined jaw and strong cheeks. He looked dearly to her, appreciated of the words, taking her hands in a caring hold.

Feliciano had never seen him act this loving in his entire stay in the castle.

Antonio and Lovino then moved close, the three of them greeting in a quick bow. Ludwig saw the way Antonio held Lovino's waist, the rings in their fingers, and quickly noticed something that had his eyes widening for a slight moment, but he quickly hid it when Lovino wrapped his arms on his chest, his glare pretty much the same as he had remembered it.

"You look like a boulder."

"I see you're still as eloquent as ever." As to not say anything else.

“It’s great to see you again,” Antonio added before Lovino could continue.

“Likewise.”

With Vincenzo and Feliciano’s help, Augusto reached him, startled suddenly at seeing his now immense figure.

“Augusto!” Ludwig greeted, with a bow and a respectful smile.

“Goddamn boy, come over here, I can’t carry you like I used to,” he laughed, but Ludwig was obedient and came forward to another Valenti hug, receiving rather harsh pats in the back that betrayed whatever sickness Augusto had gotten. “You look exactly like Aldrich did at your age. The Beilschmidt genes are strong in you. Best German line of rulers I can honestly say."

“Surely no one can compare to the Valenti."

“Boy, we haven’t ruled since Romulus himself, but grazie, grazie, keep saying that,” they laughed.

“I’m sure Feliciano told you about your room accommodations, our servants as well as myself will lead you to them,” Ludwig offered the entrance and he could easily tell that they were eager about staying in a castle, taking his welcome and beginning to go in.

Augusto was paining from the proud walk he tried to make, sometimes stumbling, but through it remaining nonchalant and continuing forward.

“Augusto, please, use your cane,” Vincenzo told him, bringing it forward to him.

Augusto did take it, but angrily and only raising it in the air in disapproval. “I can do this by myself!” He declared loudly, but half way through, he became needy of it and his footsteps joined along with the harsh stabbing of the stick to the floor tiles.

Ludwig and Feliciano decided to follow as the last behind, but there was something bothering the arising King that he couldn’t remain without knowing much longer. “Are Antonio and Lovino married?” He asked Feliciano suddenly, in a whisper hoping the rest wouldn’t listen.

“Yes, they’ve been married for three years now,” he told him, already used to the idea. But Ludwig was deeply impressed, and from a strain he held, Feliciano could tell he was trying hard not to laugh.

“What’s wrong?” He asked.

“It’s just, we used to make a lot of fun about it. Didn’t think it would actually happen.”

Feliciano let out a chuckle, remembering, but it was still nice that they did. Over the years they showed great attraction and love for the other, and Feliciano blessed it each year, wishing he could be given that very same devotion.

Ludwig moved further ahead before any conversation could arise between them, and so Feliciano moved then by his mother’s side, taking her arm to wrap as he walked alongside

her. He pointed to many of the murals, speaking of its artist, meanings and stories behind it. Renata was just as into art as Feliciano, so she was deeply impressed, questioning and pointing to details that Feliciano loved hearing about. As they went up a new set of stairs, Feliciano noticed the heavy work it took Augusto, how he had to hold down to the railing and Lovino had to go and help him.

“Mamma, what’s wrong with Nonno?” He asked with clear worry in his tone.

“He developed a muscle deficiency soon after you left,” she said sadly, the same hurt in her eyes as she watched him having to hold himself from Lovino to continue going up.

“Are you guys getting help for him? Medicine, treatments,” he went on.

“We have two doctors in the village constantly visiting to check him. They offer all these things as well as diets that he refuses to partake in.”

Feliciano rolled his eyes. Typical, but then again he would probably do the same thing.

“But he still insists to work on the fields with the rest, flirts with every woman that walks before him, still as lively telling his soldier stories to the village, and still gives the children piggy back rides, which sometimes make him return to the villa with more back pain,” she laughed, and Feliciano smiled as well, noticing that Augusto went on with his speech on how he could continue down the hall by himself, much to his older brother’s annoyance.

Despite his predicament, Augusto will never stop being the strong grandfather figure Feliciano had always seen him as. No matter what happened to his body, his soul was still made of the strongest iron.

Speaking of strong.

Renata was rather hesitant to ask, gazing strongly at Feliciano, trying to see what would be an opportune moment to mention it. While he seemed distracted with a chandelier they were passing under, she decided to be quick. “Ludwig has definitely changed,” she began.

As she expected, Feliciano’s expression became evidently soured. “For the worst,” he said harshly.

“He seemed awfully kind to me, as he had always been. I wasn’t expecting that after the letters you were writing me.”

“Probably only to you guys. He didn’t give me that welcome when I first came to the castle.” He was somehow even jealous about it.

“Why wouldn’t he? Why would he be acting this way towards you?”

Feliciano grew exasperated, Renata fearing that he would throw one of the many vases they passed in his sudden anger. “I don’t know, mamma, I wish I did! But he’s still being horrible and rude and menacing! He’s done nothing to deserve neither my friendship nor love.”

“I’m sure if you both talked-”

“He’s impenetrable as a wall! Nothing is going to work.” He was defeated and how it hurt Renata, to see their adoring friendship reach this point, of anger, hurt and betrayal, all that she had been confident would never happen and had even made Feliciano feel before leaving. But faith had betrayed them and now she had no way to console him in the matter. With a breath, she decided to remain silent.

The rooms they were given were extravagant and one by one next to the other. Feliciano had spent the rest of the day and night with them, all sharing what was Augusto’s room to talk loudly and laugh. It was the noise that got many of the Beilschmidts coming down to shush them, but to also join in the extensive screaming as they greeted each other after ten years. Feliciano introduced them all to Kiku, and upon finding out what was going on with Augusto, decided to offer his expertise and work up something for them before they left.

It was such a cheery atmosphere of the conversations he missed having. He spent the night in Antonio and Lovino’s room, the three of them talking till the late hours. It was there that Feliciano noticed how Lovino refused to take off his shirt and remain dressed even when he went to sleep by the figure of his husband. Maybe he was just cold, he thought, so he shrugged it off and went to sleep with them. Tomorrow they had a ball.

He dressed in a tight fitting dress jacket, embroidered in gold at the collar, shoulders and sleeve ends. It opened to reveal another tight fighting vest of deep red, buttons crossed in gold, fitting white pants, with a perfect golden and ruby belt, and his usual black boots. He wore the cross necklace last, finished just as Renata came in to see him. Her breath of impression was enough to get Feliciano’s attention, who turned towards her smiling and accepting to her presence. Renata was elegantly dressed in a red satin dress, puffed sleeves, covering another white transparent dress commingling with gold, the same that was tied in her front and the necklaces she wore.

“Mamma, you look so elegant!” He complimented.

“And you look dashing, mio bambino!” She came close to caress his cheeks and kiss his forehead dearly. She laid there for quite a while, holding him as he had done when he was a child, not that he minded it, but there was something rather odd about it. He actually felt sadness from her and had to move away to look into her eyes and see what was going on, but she easily feigned content.

“Come on, everyone is waiting up in the ballroom.”

“Up? You mean down.”

“No, up, the one with the crystal dome at the sphere.”

Feliciano had suddenly stood, surprised that it was chosen for today. Louis had mentioned that it was only for very special occasions, but Ludwig’s birthday already passed and there were no important dates set in his calendar. The doubts he pushed away in favor of joining

his mother and arriving there himself, quite ecstatic to finally be able to see this particular ballroom in person.

He was blinded, he was transfixed. How could he take notice of the large amount of people there, of the dancing, of the talks, of the other royals he was supposed to meet, when he was too overawhelmed by the gold, the velvet, the shimmering of the large chandeliers, the spectacular night sky above them, covered by the wonderfully crafted dome that was a piece of art by itself. The rest of the riches continued down, in the sculptures in the walls, in the murals, in the paintings, in the crafted floors.

Feliciano had only dreamed of such places, and never did he think that he could stand alive in one, that he could move across it, that he could feel intimidated by its grandeur and elaborateness.

“This place... this place is wonderful,” Renata complimented, just as breath taken as Feliciano.

The arising Queen couldn’t even utter words and it wasn’t until he could hear a distinct giggling that he actually came back down to the floor, to the ball.

“Erzsébet!” Feliciano squealed, jumping on her, both sharing a grasp that made them spin as if they were ready to dance with the couples that had already started.

“Oh, Feliciano, it’s so nice to see you again!” She finally said after they were done laughing loudly enough to catch the attention of many.

“Erzsébet! Look at you, beautiful, regal. Oh gods, I wish I could be as queenly as you when I’m crowned.” Feliciano spun her around to take a better look at her green dress, standing out in this room full of gold, reds and whites. She wore a simple tiara to show her power as Queen of Clubs and it fitted very well with the rest of her elegancy.

“You will be Feliciano! You’re already so fitting.” She rubbed his hair as she had done once, but careful not to ruin it for the special occasion.

Another figure came close, and once Feliciano recognized as well, he went and hugged him, as tightly as he had Erzsébet, despite the other’s clear annoyance and how he tried to find a way to escape.

“Roderich! You’re here too!”

“Of course I would be, how could I miss-” Erszébet stepped on his shoe before he could continue. Luckily Feliciano hadn’t noticed.

“We must sit and talk! There’s so much we need to tell each other about, like, you have to tell me-”

“That would be wonderful, Feliciano! But before we do that, it’s important that we introduce you to someone.” She then eased the presence of another figure, tall, commanding, more

intimidating than even Ludwig. If it wasn't for the kind smile on his face and his sweet violet eyes, Feliciano would have trembled and begged for Erszébet to hold him.

"This is Ivan Braginsky, King of Clubs," she introduced proudly.

Ivan in turn bowed to the arising Queen, gentleness to it that Feliciano found himself trusting, smiling and bowing as kindly in return.

"It is an honor to finally meet you. The letters that have arrived in Clubs detailing what you've done interest me greatly. I admire your actions."

That was so kind, and Feliciano couldn't help but bow again in great thanks for the compliment, giving him one of his well-known smiles.

"And I've heard wonders about your strength, your majesty. The kingdom has never seemed more impenetrable, what with a Queen and Jack like Erzsébet and Roderich as well."

The three smiled with quite the pride.

"As expected. The field that keeps King Khaos prisoner is in our land. We always have to prepare for whatever he might decide to unleash, or whatever the other kingdoms might throw against us." And he was menacing, fearsome in a way that no one seemed to have noticed but himself.

It seemed like Erzsébet and Roderich had gotten used to it.

Feliciano bowed as if to show that he should feel no such threat from the Hearts Kingdom. Feliciano was not looking for war, and he hoped it was the same thing with Ludwig.

"Ah, there you are!" Yet another familiar voice, who came close to the group to get his greetings as well. "I've been looking all over for you. You think I was going to forget my young boy," Francis greeted him, with already welcoming hands that Feliciano fell into and laughed.

"Your company in the mansion is always missed, and here too actually. You should visit more often."

Francis used to play so much with him, used to come with stories of the Diamond Kingdom, even showed him some dessert recipes and was there to talk about any insecurity or curious question he had held. It was Francis who had even given him 'the talk' when his family was avoiding having Augusto do it.

"Feliciano, dear, I would if Ludwig was only more accepting of it." He pinched his cheeks, cooing in a manner that made him laugh, Feliciano not minding as he continued.

"Ignore him, I'm here, and that should be enough to visit more often."

"Even if I could, I'm busy myself with my kingdom, and my young Queen still needs help and guidance for her ruling. It's almost like raising a child myself."

With a sign he ushered a pair of brothers, Feliciano could tell by their likeliness, closer. They were both very young, one seemed to have just begun what would be his teenage years, the other girl, even younger. Feliciano guessed around nine or ten years old.

“These are Bach and Liliana Zwingli, respective arising Jack and Queen of Diamonds,” Francis presented.

Both were nervous and the boy seemed to refuse to bow, but he ended up doing so because his sister did, kindly, as respectable, and with the ever grace of a Queen.

“You both are beautiful darlings,” Feliciano complimented, to which the boy looked insulted, but the girl blushed in thanks. “Zwingli? That name sounds familiar. By any chance, are you both related to Rebecca Zwingli?”

“Of course, she’s our mother,” Lili answered easily.

“Really? That means you’re related to Ludwig.”

“We’re his cousins actually,” Bach answered.

“That explains. Did you know, your parents actually got married in my village and had their party in my house?” He thought he could let them know. It perked their curiosity and thus all of them got into conversation.

Feliciano enjoyed his time with all of them, eating, dancing, getting to know the royals he hadn’t met before and catching up on the years that passed between the ones he did know. Yet the meaning of this ball did not evade him.

Why were all the royals here? Why choose the finest ballroom for it? Really, what were they celebrating? He questioned everything around him even as he rested upon a table that he shared with the rest of his family, all tired from their own feasting. It was becoming late, yet things were still as alive, people still danced, people still kept arriving, and no one seemed like they were ready to leave.

“Feliciano?” Renata called back his attention to the table. “What’s wrong?”

He gazed once again to the room, the liveliness of the people, understanding, they knew what they were here for, but yet he, arising Queen, did not.

“Just confused, I guess,” he said, taking a sip from the wine he had been given.

“I’m just as confused. Kiku gave me these exercises to try and I can’t even read them.” Augusto currently held the scroll he was talking about, turning it in all directions, but it was still a puzzle.

“I’m sorry about that, I’ll make you an Italian translation for tomorrow,” Kiku promised, just joining them after a round of dancing.

“No wonder.” Augusto finally noticed it was written in Japanese. “I’m sorry I interrupted, what is it that you’re confused about, caro.”

All in the table gave their attention back to Feliciano, who was rather nervous to admit, hands rubbing on his glass hoping that none would judge him.

“I…I don’t know what this ball is for,” he admitted.

Instantly all held nervous eyes, some angry, some sad, and then there were some who were actually understanding. As always, no one seemed to bother to tell him, and Feliciano was angry about it to the point that he even placed the cup on his table rather harshly.

“I would gladly appreciate it if someone could make it clear.”

“They really didn’t tell you?” Lovino was the one who dared answer, quite mad, arms wrapping on his chest as if ready to face whoever decided to let it remain a secret from him.

“Some years they do leave it as a surprise to the arising Queen,” Augusto added.

“It’s traditional.”

“I don’t see the point of it this time."

“Queen Louis probably decided so.”

“When things are like this between them.”

“They really should have given him a heads up."

“But I’m sure it would still be beautiful."

“If Feliciano-”

“Will someone please-” Feliciano suddenly interrupted in a loud voice, “-just tell me.” It lowered in a kindly beg, not standing this discussion about him while he still didn’t have an answer.

And all were too worried to tell him, and with the continuing silence, Renata decided to take the dive, taking his hand in a loving hold. She looked around to the party, alive, people dancing, and lights shimmering splendidly.

“I don’t know if we should be telling you, but I think it’s necessary after what you’re going through with Ludwig.” She held his hands tighter, before finally admitting: “Feliciano…this is your engagement ball.”

It did not help at all, Feliciano was still as confused. “My engagement ball? It doesn’t make sense, I’m already engaged to Ludwig.”

“Long ago, last time being with Romulus,” Augusto began to tell, bringing the table to silence as they prepared to listen. "The arising King and Queen were not betrothed so immediately at such a young age, as it was done with you and Ludwig. In those times, no one really knew if the King and Queen were to marry until what they called the half arising ball, this one in other words. It was in this ball that the King would ask the Queen for marriage. If

they denied, then they would go through with a coronation without a marriage. If they accepted, preparations were made to add a wedding and thus begin the lighting of the main tower, which shows the entire city the days left to the coronation. After the war of the Darkened Decades, it changed to better gain access to the gods, and to be more expected of what kind of ruling the kingdom would have. A married King and Queen are more wanted because it means more peace in their union, better prosperity and more power to the kingdom. One without, although not to be seen as anything bad, still weakens the kingdom slightly, and if the arising King and Queen deny, then precautions must be taken to prepare the kingdom for that, which is why they prefer it to be known as soon as possible."

"We decided for you to marry Ludwig because you both had been such good friends when you were children," Vicenzo added.

"We thought your kind of love would be the best for the kingdom, which is why we decided on sealing a marriage," Renata said.

"Not to mention you are also the first Italian Queen since Augusta," Augusto reminded.

Silence still continued on, the information weighting on Feliciano.

He knew the kingdom was dependent on that kind of power, but he never knew it had this history to it, never knew those chances could exist, and suddenly felt this harsh blame at them for tying him up to the person Ludwig had grown up to be.

"But if my marriage is already sealed, why make this ball? Why have him ask?"

"Like I said, it's mostly for tradition. Kings and Queens continued with the ball just for a touch of romance. It's seen as a starting point for the castle to begin the planning and preparations for the wedding and coronation, and to start the lighting of the main tower with the counting," Kiku decided to be a part of.

Feliciano continued to remain silent, with a somber look that was unlike him. He gazed forward to the party with hatred, understanding then the festiveness, the luxury, the amount of people, why no one had left yet, why his family came, why even the other royals came. This, whether in the past or present, had been considered the deciding point of what would be the Kingdom's future, one that was already decided for him, and the party seemed to taunt him on the fact that his voice and even Ludwig's was never a part of it.

"Anyways!" Renata suddenly interrupted, wanting to change the dulling pace that their table had gotten after the revelation. "Now that we have that announcement out of hand, I think it's time Lovino shared with the rest of us his own," she smiled to her eldest son, who instantly tensed and blushed at the sudden attention he was given.

Renata kept ushering for him to say it with her constant smile, but Lovino was still paralyzed, seeing if he perhaps had a chance to escape, fidgeting and beginning to sweat. Antonio placed his hands on his shoulders, a smile so big that it even spread to Feliciano, and he grew more curious as to what it could be.

“Come on Lovi, what is it?” Feliciano turned completely towards him, wanting to offer any hold or aid to calm him over his sudden uneasiness.

“Come on, don’t hide that you’re just as excited as I am,” Antonio told him lastly, and it was the words that got Lovino to breath, to give up into his arms and finally say it. But instead of wording it, he knew it was best if he actually showed it.

He began unbuttoning his cufflinks, much to the tension of the table, all moving closer to take a quicker look. It was free, and Lovino began pulling it down, revealing red marks swirling wonderfully across the few skin he showed. They could mean about anything, but it was sure enough when Lovino turned his hand and showed two protruding ruby jewels from his skin that aligned down from his wrist. They signified two months, and it meant something that had Feliciano squealing and shouting ecstatically.

“Oh my gods, you’re going to have a baby!” The rest that Feliciano kept shouting was gibbering as he pulled both Antonio and Lovino into a strong hug, jumping in their seats, even beginning to tear up. “I’m going to be an uncle! I’m going to be an uncle!” He announced loud enough to grab the attention of many in the ball. They turned and noticed the jewels and marks Lovino had in his wrist, and they all began applauding and offering congratulations to the couple.

Lovino usually hated this much attention, but couldn’t dare say a thing when his brother was this excited, when his mother and father were deeply delighted, his grandfather so happy that Kiku had to pat him in the back to avoid him having him tear up as well. Antonio was the proudest, and he just loved hearing over and over again that Lovino was bearing the magic that would one day create his son or daughter. He kept a tight hold on him to show to everyone in the ballroom that yes, he was the one that offered the other half of the magic, the other proud father.

“I get it! Enough! You’re happy! Yes, I’m having a baby! Now get off!” Lovino pushed him away back to his chair, fixing himself and settling back his sleeve as it had been. He didn’t need any more attention.

“He told me before we left to Berlin, and I already started making little socks,” Renata glowed, having to hold herself from screaming any louder.

“Mamma, you don’t have to do that, I’m sure Antonio and I could-”

“Nonsense, we’ll give that baby everything. Once we come back. I’ll immediately send workers to work on the room in your household,” Augusto acclaimed.

“I’ll send a load of presents each month, I can even talk to the castle hold and we can have you give birth here,” Feliciano added.

“You guys have to stop. It’s only been two months.”

“I mean, not that we shouldn’t-” Lovino glared at Antonio before he finished that statement.

“We’re capable of doing the necessary things ourselves. Besides, we already decided that the baby would be born in Italy, so I’m hoping to give birth in the manor,” Lovino had planned.

“Of course,” Augusto raised his glass in approval.

“Nothing will make us happier,” Vincenzo said, and Renata was just too excited and full of energy to even say a word.

“Have you thought of names?” Feliciano decided to ask.

“Oh come on! It’s only been two months!”

“I like Mariano!” It seemed Antonio had already started.

“Don’t encourage them!”

“Oh, I like Elena!”

“How about Enrico?”

“Nicoletta?”

“Augustino!” Augustus proclaimed, which earned a glare from all of them. “Okay, okay, fine,” he seemed disappointed.

“I always liked the name Sara from your provinces,” even Kiku was taking part in it.

“Oh, that does sound pretty!” Antonio agreed.

“Remind me to get you a book of names. I’m sure there’s one here in the castle I can lend to you.”

“Really, you guys should-”

A sudden interrupting cough brought them all into immediate silence. They all looked up to see Ludwig, dressed in a tight burgundy jacket, with silver buttons connecting it at its center, black velvet at the collar and sleeves. He wore a proud St. Mark Lion with a Hearts symbol, a simplistic cape, going along with the respectful stance he took before them. His eyes were commanding, a message of wanting to drive them away that they all instantly knew. They began to stand, giving the space for them that was needed, much to Feliciano’s dread. They moved to the crowd of the ball, Feliciano’s last comfort being a hand on his shoulder by his brother. The table was empty, Ludwig and Feliciano were alone…well, that was what Feliciano thought until he turned and noticed that the music had stopped, that the dancing and movements in the room halted instantly, all were turned towards them, expecting eyes and smiles for what they were to witness. New simple glasses with drinks were already being spread, preparing for the toast that would come surely once Feliciano gave his answer.

Once it was quiet enough, Ludwig turned towards him, leaning down, with no nervousness or shake, as practiced as everything was with him. He took a hold of his hand, then looking up to him with disinterest, annoyance as his own, putting in order the words he surely practiced.

“Feliciano Valenti,” he started. "We have reached the half of our year of arising, with only six months left for the coming of our own ruling. As expected, the kingdom would like to know if you accept my proposal. I wish to marry you and gain power for myself as well as for the kingdom so we can maintain it as prosperous as my grandparents will leave it to us. We will have sufficient heirs to inherit our wealth and names, and bring honor to the kingdom and to the Aces as it should be. I have proven myself to be respectable, strong, loyal and knowledgeable to be your husband, and you have proven to be as obedient, orderly, kind, and beautiful to be my own and my Queen. Thus I ask, will you marry me?”

He dared talk about deserving, he dared talked about proof, call him obedient because he had cowered him to do so, orderly because he needed to come up with something that was Beilschmidt enough for him to be a part of, kind because it was probably the only thing he knew about him now, and beautiful, it was superficial, it made him feel like he was just a decoration he wanted to have.

How dare he proclaim himself something that he hadn’t been to him, go on and ask after all the comments, after his behavior, after his demeaner, his coldness. He had been coarse, rough, rude, nothing like the type of husband that deserved him, nothing like a lover, nothing like even the friends they once were.

He wanted to slap him right there, he wanted to cry, scream his disapproval for all in the ball to know about.

It was then that he decided to look to the crowd, still expecting his sure approval. He looked down to the still evident red mark on his ring finger, the reminder of the promise they had made to the Aces.

They had been tied by the gods, and the kingdom was ready to celebrate the coming prosperity of an Italian Queen after a long wait.

Everybody was counting, the King and Queen especially, who stared along with the rest as if this was some show for their entertainment.

With heavy duty on him, with their stares, Feliciano knew that he had to please, he knew that he had to give the required answer, no matter how Ludwig had been, no matter what he was thinking.

It was tradition, he thought lastly.

So he took a breath, calmed, ready to release what was to come with his answer:

“No.”

Chapter End Notes

If you’re confused as to how birthing in this world works like, don’t worry, it will be later explained in the story or if anything I can write a post about it in my tumblr.

EDITED: 30.10.2024

Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

One of my biggest joys is updating quickly. I hope you enjoy this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

All faces in the room were instantly frozen in shock, settled in paralyze statures as they tried to believe what they just heard. The silence that came was haunting, potent, their stares full of fear and concern. Ludwig was in the same state, still leaning, although Feliciano was seeing the growing anger in his eyes.

“I’m sorry, what? Could you repeat that?” He asked, hoping that with the sudden aggravation in his tone and the feeling of dread in the atmosphere, Feliciano would change his answer. But the arising Queen remained strong even with its lingering, letting go of Ludwig’s hand and sitting aligned in his chair, willing to repeat himself, and more strongly to make it clear.

“I said no. I refuse to marry you, Ludwig Beilschmidt.”

The gasps of the crowd were clearer now, whispers arose, but yet all were still appalled to their spots, a shakiness to them that didn’t even let them move a step. They thought it was just some cruel trick, a joke the arising Queen took too far, and would soon give the answer they wanted to qualm the anxiousness of the ball.

“Stop with this nonsense, Feliciano. This is not something you should be threading so messily about,” Ludwig growled.

“I repeat, my decision is no.” He stood rather harshly, wanting to step away from the fury that grew ever so stronger with the arising King. He turned towards the crowd, as blank as canvases. “I apologize, but please, don’t let this interrupt the dancing and feasting, there’s still plenty of food to take. Thank you for coming.” He bowed to all and began heading towards the exit, with sure steps, all eyes following him. Only Ludwig didn’t, who still stood in his stance, not entirely sure what to do now. He hadn’t practiced for this, he wasn’t ready for what the crowd could tell him, what he was supposed to tell them, what he was to face. If he turned, they would all see not only his anger, but the fall of his dignity.

“Um…Feliciano,” Renata called, running behind him.

“Oh dei,” Vincenzo joined her, Antonio following as well.

“I thought you left your idiot ways!” Lovino called, joining, Kiku coming as well.

“Feliciano! Feliciano!” The voices kept calling as they tried to reach him, but as the echoes of his name continued down the halls, it meant that the arising Queen continued never the less,

the figures having to rush quicker or better get his attention with their more loud shouts. The last one to leave was Augusto, who actually chuckled at the occurrence, much to the annoyance of the King and Queen.

“Feliciano!” This call shot along with the loud smash Feliciano gave to the doors that finally returned him to the main halls of the castle and away from the commotion of the ball.

“Feliciano! Get back in there and fix this!” Vincenzo shouted.

“There’s nothing to be fixed,” Feliciano told him back.

“You know well that you have to!” Lovino shouted.

“Feliciano, what you’re doing is dangerous,” Kiku warned, with a gentler tone as they kept following behind.

“Caro, I know that Ludwig is not the most ideal match, but you have to think about what it means to the kingdom,” Renata tried to convince, with the same gentleness as Kiku.

“I’ve already done enough for this kingdom, and I for one wanted to do something for myself.”

“Your willing to put your kingdom at risk for yourself?” Lovino was insulted.

“It’s not going to be at risk!”

“Of course it is! You just denied matrimony to your arising King!”

“I’m not the first one to do that!”

“But you’re the first one do it after being tied in an agreement by the Aces!”

“Feliciano, this could have catastrophic repercussions!”

“You’re overreacting!” They were suddenly caught up with Augusto, who moved towards them rather contently, no stress from what just happened.

“Papa, are you seriously accepting this from Feliciano?”

“If the boy doesn’t want to, then he doesn’t want to!”

“But what about the agreement with the Aces!” They kept repeating, and it was driving Feliciano sick.

“I’ll find a way to annul it!”

They finally reached the doors to his room, a big relief for him, but at the same time there was the fact that his whole family and Kiku followed him there.

“I don’t think that’s possible!”

“Feliciano, it will take you a lo-”

“Please,” he begged, “just stop! I know there’s a lot I have to deal with right now, but I want to enjoy some time to rest at least.”

“You just want to go to sleep after that!?” Lovino shouted.

“Yes. Now would you be kind enough to leave." With one last smile, hiding away the turmoil, he went into his room and shut the doors harshly in their faces.

They continued to murmur in front of his door, and wanting to get away, decided on heading to the bathroom, where he prepared a bath. Not usually hours he took baths in, but he needed to relax, needed to forget, think that he could wash away the heaviness of today with the water.

A sufficient amount of time passed, knowing well that his family left, so he headed back into his room so could change into his night wear in relative peace. He kept his thoughts on the melody of the music box that played, on the rosy scent he used from the soaps, on preparing his bed, on organizing the things he was supposed to do for tomorrow in his head. No matter how hard he tried to keep his mind focused, it wasn’t enough to drive away the harsh throw of the door as it opened and closed once again. The force was hard enough to shake the room slightly.

“I’ve seen you do a lot of reckless things ever since you started your arising, no, ever since we were kids, but this, this is your finest work!” Ludwig started, hiding no poison in his voice.

Feliciano was turned away from him, standing in his place as he went to turn off the music box.

“Do you know what you just did? Do you know what you just caused? Do you have any idea how much of a fool you made me look up there?” He shouted, reddened with anger, pointing fingers harshly to the door. “I’ve never been more embarrassed, never more humiliated!”

“I was given a choice,” Feliciano suddenly interrupted, saving the music box in its usual place, still refusing to look back to him.

“That wasn’t meant to be one! It was for show! You weren’t supposed to go ahead and decide what you wanted carelessly!”

“I still stand by it,” he continued bravely on, beginning to pull the blankets from his bed.

“You will anger the Aces! Who knows what kind of curse they’ll befall on the kingdom for this.”

“The Aces are not cruel enough to punish a large population of people just because I can’t get along with my King."

“Well we won’t know until we see it, this had never happened before."

“Well I’m quite proud."

“This is nothing to be proud of, Feliciano!”

“I’ll be proud my own way!”

“This selfish pride of yours will ruin the Kingdom."

“Oh, now I’m the one who’s selfish,”

“At least I am trying to fulfill my duties!”

“Uncaring of what it means to you? What it could mean to me?”

“Our own opinions should be the least of the kingdom’s problems.”

“They care about our happiness just like we do theirs.”

“Then make them happy! Accept, go apologize and do what is expected of you."

“You don’t even love me!” He screamed, wanting to drive him away after he was daring to move closer and closer with the fury of each onslaught of his words.

Whatever walls he had been holding after his refusal broke, began to crack in the tears that gathered in his eyes.

“Why do you care so much? You clearly do not want this marriage either, you want nothing to do with me, you want me away from you, you don’t- you don’t-” his whimpering didn’t let him continue, the tears now spilling over his face.

It was the clearest thing in the room, as Ludwig stood silent. What expression he held Feliciano preferred not to know, not after he was breaking like this in front of him. He raised his hands to his face to try and cover himself, but no matter how, he couldn’t control the shivering, the sobs that drowned anything else, even the tears that managed to stain his hands.

“I…I,” Ludwig stuttered.

Feliciano looked up, his reddened eyes and tear stained cheeks plain for Ludwig to see, and Ludwig’s frozen and still expression, of senseless, of even hurt. Feliciano whipped away what he could, trying to stand as straight as before, even if it hurt to.

“Tell me, Ludwig, tell me please. Do you actually feel…something for me now?"

Feliciano didn’t think Ludwig could turn any whiter, didn’t think he could see that lost expression again, clearly holding himself, chaining whatever he truly wanted to say. The silence that continued was agitating, it only made Feliciano hurt the more.

“I…” Ludwig started. “I…I can’t tell you.”

“You can’t tell me, or you just don’t want to admit it."

“No! No, no, it’s not that, it’s just-” he actually tried to move closer, extending his arms, Feliciano didn’t know for what since he pushed and turned him away.

“I don’t want to hear anything else! My decision is final." He headed towards his bed to sit. “Unless you can see me as an equal, change, respect me, and really prove that you care or even love me, there will be no marriage. I refuse to accept someone like you as my husband.” He fell down unto his bed, pulling the blankets over and settling his head in the comfort of the many pillows. “Who is to say a loveless marriage will not hurt the kingdom as simply denying it," he uttered before he remained in a single position, closed eyes away from the figure of the arising King, who still stood in his place, wakened eyes that wanted to say so much.

“Feliciano-” he tried to reach.

“I’m done talking about this to you,” was the last he uttered.

Ludwig remained standing, looking down to him, hoping for a chance, but Feliciano was quickly asleep, and like that the conversation was meant to be finish. With a groan Ludwig began undressing himself and prepared for his rest, as he usually did, turned as always, hoping to forget. He pushed away the pain, pushed away any want of tears, hid his anguish. He promised himself he wouldn’t dare break. He could hide it, he could push it back, the hard grip on his blankets the result. Part of him hoped that for the next day Feliciano would come into his senses, and if not, then he needed to rest for the coming storm that would be waiting for them then. For once, he actually missed the melody of the music box playing dimly under Feliciano’s blankets.

Six months passed, to a time when usually the kingdom was preparing itself for the grand royal wedding. But it did not come, just as a coronation was not prepared.

No matter the insisting Feliciano was given in the time to come, his answer was still plainly no, screamed at them all so much it was becoming a regular occurrence nobody was surprised about anymore. As the news spread across all the provinces, letters of all kinds, in all the tongues of the kingdom, arrived with pleads to the arising Queen to change his mind or ones saying that the arising King should change his attitude.

It grew into one of the big discussions in the kingdom. Was what Feliciano doing inspiring and altering? Or was it a disgrace that needed to be shamed on? Was the Prince’s behavior just expectant of a King? Or was he just being ill-mannered and he needed to change if he wanted a Queen like Feliciano as a husband?

No matter what the kingdom thought, discussed, worried, shouted or even showed as Feliciano would be walking along the streets of the city, it would always end up being lost words or actions to the arising Queen. He rather maintained his visits to the city as friendly ones to spend good time with his people.

Feliciano, who along with Kiku's help, settled a long work of trying to find annulments to the promise of the Aces. The castle made it hard as they did not want to offer any information, any libraries, any agreements, scrolls, or books. What Feliciano wanted to do, he would have to do it with only Kiku's help, searching on through all the libraries and archives of the castle for any clue by themselves.

Until such a way was found, or until Ludwig and Feliciano could come into an agreement, King Aldrich and Queen Louis decided it was best to not step down yet and continue on with their reign, beyond what they were usually expected of, to avoid any kind of wrong doings with the Aces.

Feliciano turned twenty-one with no husband and no crown. Ludwig, Feliciano and Kiku were already behind, even if by a single month, and that only flared the arising King more, who still did not change and did not hesitate in his ever pretentious attitude that only got the ignorance of the arising Queen, continuing to think that Feliciano would just give up one day and come crawling begging for another proposal.

They still worked on the doings of the kingdom, more so now, because even if they weren't crowned yet, there were just things that the King and Queen were loosening power in and they needed their help.

This shouldn't be happening, Ludwig angered as he paced about the King's study room, harsh steps that threatened to smash the tiles and make a hole to the floor below.

The room had a view to one of the many gardens, a particular one in which Queen Louis, Kiku, and Feliciano were enjoying coffee and tea drinks and discussions on marital funding. It annoyed how calmly Feliciano worked on the negotiations, the only actions being the frivolous move of his hands that spoke as ever with him. His grandmother dared go with that same repose, and Kiku was just as peaceful.

"How can they be so relaxed with all that's happening?" Ludwig questioned.

"They are just making do with what they can in the situation," Aldrich said, sitting upon his desk as he worked on documents.

Ludwig didn't answer back, he yet maintained his scolding gaze at the three figures below and it wasn't helping Aldrich with the calm he needed to work on these assignments.

"You shouldn't push the full blame on Feliciano, a part of this is your doing," Aldrich dared comment.

"My doing? I've only ever just been loyal to the crown, I'm only doing what I should as a King," Ludwig defended himself, his harsh steps going over to Aldrich now.

"I didn't tell you that you should be treating your Queen as such. Even I can tell that you're completely disregarding his feelings."

"If I remember correctly, you once said that a Queen is a beautiful companion to your disposal."

“Exactly, I said a companion, not a lightweight to ignore. I don’t know where you got this idea that you should be so disrespectful to your Queen. In the eleven years that have passed, we showed you well to be a King, especially after your earlier power activation, and although we were rather harsh with it, we are proud that it helped you become as strong, efficient, commanding, and respectable as we wanted. There is nothing to discuss there, but Louis and I hoped that we had shown a proper example of a relationship for you to know how to be around Feliciano during the arising year.”

Ludwig turned away. “Well, things are different this time.” He took seat by the window, his stare glued to the glass and the figures from below.

“What difference? So he’s the first Italian Queen in centuries, that doesn’t mean that the relationship dynamics should be any different. For the Aces' mercy, you two used to be best friends, why can’t you just repeat that?”

No answer, Ludwig’s stare became melancholic, leaning to the glass in a defeated posture that Aldrich knew he was not going to receive answer an answer from. He sighed and leaned in his chair exasperated, his glance going to a stack of envelopes and then suddenly being reminded.

“Does it have to do with that letter you received from King Ivan two years ago?” He wondered.

Although his grandson made sure to remain as still in his sitting, it didn’t escape the sudden tension that appeared in his eyes.

“I remember you were pretty distraught after reading it. Your mother told me she hadn’t seen you cry like that in a long time.”

Ludwig's face was now completely turned, not sparring an inch of expression on his face.

Silence continued on, Aldrich hoping it could fill the room in enough calm so his grandson could tell him. “What was in it that is making you act this way with him? You know you can tell me,” he eased gently, waiting patiently for any answer, but no matter, Ludwig remained just as turned and silent.

“Your thoughts on Feliciano completely changed after it…you didn’t even send him a twentieth birthday present,” he reminded, tempted to stand and come close to him, but he settled in his chair, only trying to lean and see more hints from the appearance of the face he currently hid.

“You always seem like you need some sort of consolation when you’re thinking about it.”

Just then the doors of the study room opened, a shaking servant holding a silver encrusted tray coming in. It still did nothing to stop Aldrich in his wait, still facing Ludwig for words, as if the servant wasn’t there.

“I’m sorry, but I cannot, I rather deal with what I can myself.” Ludwig sounded sure, determined, and Aldrich knew that there was no way around it.

He'd like to think he tried, so he sighed, turned to the servant and told him that it was okay to place the tray upon the desk. Too preoccupied he was with his grandson that he did not notice the single item it held.

"I hope so, but either be kinder to Feliciano or actually help him in finding a way to cancel out your engagement by the Aces." He finally noticed the color of the item and turned to it, sudden terror marked heavily on his ever dry face.

He picked the black envelope, the green seal from Clubs showing that it was official, urgent, and real. Ludwig suddenly felt the tension in the room, turning to his grandfather, seeing clearly the fear he held over the simple black envelope he held tightly in his hand.

"Opa, what's wrong?" He asked, standing, finally moving away from the window and pushing away his earlier distress.

It was like that simple black paper had taken every word away from the King of Hearts, bringing him into mute silence, but a widened mouth still wanting to speak.

"Opa," Ludwig tried to wake him.

"A meeting!" He suddenly said, his tone brimming with anxiety, "call forward a meeting!" He made his way to the door.

"Right now?"

"Yes, immediately, tell everyone to come. Now, now, go, go," he ordered, crashing his way out through the doors to already start making the preparations.

It was a maid who had Queen Louis, Kiku and Feliciano rushing inside, saying that it was urgent and of dire need that they were all present for this sudden emergency meeting. The hall where the largest meeting room was located was filled with the crowds of all who had come, trying to make their way inside.

Feliciano had never seen so much commotion in the castle. It was nothing to compare to the ball and festival preparations, for those had been happy and invigorating, this one brought dread, panic, worried whispers through all, even the servants.

"What's happening?" He asked, hoping that anybody from the plentitude could answer him.

There was so much noise of uttered nervousness that no one had heard him. Guards came to better control the crowds and flow of the entry way, making way and space for the more official dignitaries to come in first.

"Your highness!" One had called to Feliciano upon noticing him.

He begged him to come forward, two other female guards coming and helping him squeeze throughout until he was finally inside. It wasn't any different from the hall, and he had only found a chair in the large table because it was already reserved for him. All kinds of leaders

were in there, from the arising King, to even the servant leader of the castle hold, so many that some had to stand, for all chairs that were presented were taken, not enough for all of them. Nervous murmuring continued, drowning even the chance for Feliciano to ask Kiku beside him what was going on.

Once the guards saw that everyone that should be in there was present, they brought the doors to a close, and it only grew the agitation inside. King Aldrich finally came in from another room, the presence that brought everyone to harmonious silent. It didn't last long, for they all startled and whispered fearfully between themselves when the King threw the black envelope before his chair, upon the table for all to see. Feliciano didn't recognize it, neither did Ludwig and Kiku, who gazed on with the same concern, but for everyone around them, it was clear enough, enough for the alarm that had spread all across the castle.

"Ladies and gentleman, I don't have to read aloud the contents of this letter for you all to understand," he spoke loudly enough for even the person in the very back corner to hear clearly and feel the ever potent of the King. "The Validity Spheres that Queen Louis and I last placed over fifty years ago to power King Khaos's confinements are running low and will soon end with the energy last placed by the past rulers." Startled gasps arose, whispers once again, then shushing to let the King continue to speak. "With the dwindling of the protective force, it means that more of his servants will come out to plan heavy attacks on all the major cities of the kingdoms, attacks on the royals, as well as to try to destroy the protective force King Romulus and Queen Augusta placed centuries ago. As always for when this time comes around, we have the present threat that King Khaos could escape and create ruin as he had last done." Silence fell in worry, in loved ones looking among each other, holding each other tight, shaking, fearing what could happen in the coming months.

"One of the reasons I have called you all here is to discuss and prepare warnings all across the kingdom. All the provinces must know. We have to strengthen and prepare our borders, our guards, our soldiers and armies. Send men and women to weak points that King Khaos's men can take advantage of. Send word to our people that they have to remain vigilant and careful. We all depend on each other equally to assure that no tragedy shall befall on any of us. King Ivan has written me that similar messages have been sent to the rest of the kingdoms." All military, guard, border patrol, and messenger leaders bowed in approval. "As expected, Clubs has also immediately called that the King and Queen of Hearts should hence start their journey across all of the Kingdoms to get new spheres of validity and place them on the protective field before King Khaos could use the weakening to his advantage."

Ludwig and Feliciano sat with clear panic, memories of the time they had been attacked themselves by King Khaos's men.

Renata once spoke to Feliciano about this, but he didn't think it could be before him so soon, ready to be faced.

"With the current predicament of our arising rulers, who exactly should go this time on the journey?"

Chapter End Notes

Discussion will continue in next chapter.

EDITED: 31.10.2024

Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

> Remember what I said about the 26th being the longest chapter? Yeah I take it back, this one is the longest chapter. It has the weight of two and I hope you enjoy it. This is my final chapter of the year.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“The journey has always been strictly done by crowned, sometimes married, Kings and Queens. It shouldn’t stop now!”

“Your majesties, you should do the journey once more!”

“My wife and I don’t have the vitality or energy we once had. We cannot possibly make a journey this harsh. We’d be too weak to deal with the threats. We’re slowly loosening power,” Aldrich added.

“Beisdes, the Validity Spheres only accept new power, which means that Ludwig and Feliciano’s is the one that is needed this time."

“How do we know Ludwig and Feliciano will be capable of it?”

“If I might add, I believe that they are both strong and skillful enough. They had shown me well and I can see that they can go against whatever they might face,” Egilhard, their power training teacher, helped.

“It does not excuse the fact that they are neither crowned nor married."

“What if it isn’t enough?”

“It’s a lot of time alone, what if we end up with an heir before its necessary?”

“You’re assuming too much.”

“Wouldn’t that be good even?”

“I suggest we crown and wed them immediately."

“On this short notice? There’s no time! The journey must immediately start!”

“Well, what else can we do? We can’t send Kiku."

“What if we give extra guards for the King and Queen on the journey?”

Suggestions and discussion flew on and about above the heads of Ludwig and Feliciano. It was tiring, maddening, Ludwig rubbing his temple wishing he could shush them into silence with a shout. Feliciano was scared, fearing over what this journey could hold…that is, if they decided they should even go…if they ever agreed to it. The rest continued to fight despite, but if there was something Feliciano agreed with Ludwig in the situation was that all these people were here commenting and discussing right before them, but none had given them, the arising rulers who they were speaking about, the chance to talk and join, make up their own opinions, suggestions and even choices. Shouldn't they be just as part of it?

"If I may," Ludwig suddenly interrupted, with a single raised hand to bring the quarrelling into silence so he could speak. They surprisingly handed it to him, and Ludwig knew he had to be quick before someone else continued. "What if I just go alone?"

"Absolutely not!"

"Ludwig, that is too risky!"

"You have to go with someone!"

"What if I go with Gilbert?"

"No, it has to be with your Queen."

"Then I really don't get why we need to be discussing this," Feliciano suddenly interrupted, taking order and command that no one had been expecting. Mute silence continued as they all stared to the arising Queen, making sure that it was he who said it.

"Are you saying that you would be willing to go?" Aldrich asked him.

"I…I should be…shouldn't I?"

"But they're not crowned yet!"

"What does it have to do?"

"It is still a job expected of them, even if they are still in their arising. It is their turn, it is their power that is needed, and they should commit to it as every King and Queen has done, no matter," Queen Louis finally added.

"I still insist that I can go alone," Ludwig still hoped, a plead in his voice.

"You won't! Absolutely forbidden!" Aldrich appointed. He turned to Feliciano, who sat rather nervously in his chair, eyes avoiding the many stares that were on him. "Feliciano, do you really not mind going alone with Ludwig, getting the Validity Spheres from each kingdom, and placing them in the Field?"

It was a sure duty, no matter how fearful he was about it. He knew he had to for the safety of not just the Hearts Kingdom, but all the Kingdoms. He was scared, shown obviously, trembling lips, hands intertwined in front of him, fingers rubbing together as he tried to relax

it. He gazed over to Ludwig, who was angrily tapping the table still thinking of a way to convince them.

“How long?” Feliciano asked.

“Usually it takes about two months, but when I went with Louis we did it in a month and two weeks. It all depends on how you and Ludwig fare with it. I must admit that it’s dangerous. You can be targeted, you could have problems with your transportation arrangements, you have to worry about thieves, pirates and jokers, across all kinds of terrains that you never thought could exist. But it’s necessary, for the good of all the kingdoms.”

It didn’t help at all to subside him, especially after knowing that it meant dealing with all of this alone…with Ludwig. The very arising King didn’t share in his glance, his tapping becoming more furious, trying to extinguish even something of fear with his action. It made Feliciano wonder what exactly was going on his mind to make him so tensed, so restless. Something told him that it was more than just anxiousness about the trip.

It would be just the two of them, no King, no Queen, no Jack or arising Jack, no parents, no brothers, no servants, just them, in the vastness of the world as they went on with their task.

If they went, what could this journey hold for them? Would he be able to learn from him? Would he be given a chance to connect what they hadn’t, understand, maybe even mend all that had been broken? Either that, or Ludwig would turn for the worst, more so without the eyes of the castle to stop, scold or even restrain him. It was going to be a thin line of falling into either prospect, but no matter what could come from it, there was still a job that needed both their hands.

“I-I…I’ll do it still. I-it’s in mine and Ludwig’s responsibility,” he decided surely and bright for all to hear.

Aldrich and Louis nodded, in agree with his decision. If Ludwig had suggested to even go alone, they knew he would take the journey. Even if he didn’t want to, he’d still go because of the requirement expected from him.

“So have we come to a decree?”

The entire room showed acceptance. They couldn’t say anything else when the arising rulers, and the King and Queen decided officially.

“Then it’s settled, Ludwig and Feliciano will go on the journey. Preparations must start immediately. I give you both three days to pack and prepare, for then I will have a coach ready to leave. Hurry, we have no time to loose. Send the messages, arrange the travel, the whole kingdom has to know,” King Aldrich began commanding, moving about the room as all began to scurry as they had earlier done. Some rushed out of the room to start, others spoke on with King Aldrich on the details, the meeting room and the halls becoming the mess it had earlier been, but now with more frenzy and action. Even the Jack with Kiku rushed out to get the important scrolls and preparations to create new Validity Spheres.

Feliciano still sat where he was, confused as to what he was supposed to start, especially when everyone around him was in such a mess and distress that they themselves would surely not know what to tell him. Well they did tell him to pack so he might as well prepare a trunk with all he would need for the trip. He gazed over to Ludwig hoping he could be given some hint, but there he was, still tapping furiously against the table, although his expression was now serene with a particular kind of fear, refusing to look at anything but the wood of the table.

“Ludwig…” Feliciano thought he could ask. To his surprise, he actually looked up to him, willing to hear. “Are…you okay?”

Ludwig instantly stopped his tapping, guessing Feliciano knew with it. “It’s nothing." He hid his arm, the room and halls in still too much a mess to come out in.

“Are you sure?” Feliciano asked once again.

“I’m sure, let’s just wait for this to disperse enough so we can go up and pack at least.”

Feliciano nodded, although it still didn’t erase the curiosity over the worry that still shone around Ludwig.

“Are you…really okay with this?” He still asked.

“With what exactly?”

“With going on this…with me alone?”

Ludwig didn’t answer quickly, busying his vision with the array of people that began to empty the room.

“You said it yourself, it’s a responsibility we have to uphold.” He stood, space enough for him to move, hoping to avoid anyone coming on to him with frivolous question with what just happened. Feliciano followed the same example.

They were told to pack four trunks, with all kinds of available wear, since they were going to meet with different kinds of climates, events and people. Ludwig had filled three trunks successfully, but the last one was proving harder than he had expected. He was currently checking through his jackets and coats, some holding their sashes and seals, others only silver or golden buttons that he thought were rather simplistic. He hoped to have the last trunk for Clubs and his return to Hearts, after hopefully everything went right with the placing.

“Just bring everything!” Gilbert suggested, who had decided to join Ludwig in his choosing and preparing, even placing things in the trunk himself he thought he would need.

Gilbert had packed his special swords, knives, and guns. He placed any study books he might need to catch up on regular power training when he returned. He packed some bottles of beer, and some other crazy items Ludwig would throw away at some point in the trip, and finally, a

red collar that he played with by spinning it on his finger, not really packing it yet. Ludwig hadn't noticed it, searching still in his closet.

"I should, I'm running out of clothes anyway." He turned and finally saw, face dumping in anger and annoyance. "Why do you have that?" He asked his brother, with the ever present scolding tone he always took with him, especially after sensing trouble in his game and in the very collar.

"What? Thought I'd offer you one," he smirked.

"I won't need such a thing, so give it back to whoever you stole it from." He turned and began placing what he had picked into the trunk. He was practically done, only a couple of things he could surely pack just before leaving.

"Are you sure? That's a lot of time alone with Feliciano you're going to have there."

"This is a job, Gilbert, it's not for fun!"

"Still, I mean, you'll also be going through some pretty romantic places. Maybe you'll only share one bed, maybe Feliciano will move on you and beg you things you won't be able to resist."

"Really? After the way we've been with each other lately and after his refusal to marry me, your perverse mind still dares conjure this up." He slammed his trunk in insult.

"Hey, who knows, things can change in the trip. Both your magic is powerful, especially Feliciano's. With just one round you can have him bearing easily. All this bad boy would do is cut off the reproduction magic from arising and you can focus on giving it to him good. It's just a precaution. Sure, heirs would be amazing for the kingdom, but doing so before marriage would really ruin your image as an arising King."

"Like pre-marital sex won't?"

"Hey, you can hide it somehow!"

"Feliciano has the promise necklace, everyone will know when it happens."

"If you're probably not getting married anymore, then convince him to take it off."

"I cannot until we find a sure way to cancel out the agreement with the Aces. Really just stop suggesting and approving to this. I will not initiate such a thing with him." He rolled his eyes and continued with inspecting the room, seeing if there was something he was forgetting or something else he should bring.

Gilbert thought it was best to drop the subject, stopping his play with the collar and placing it on one of the little tables.

"Whatever you say, but you have to admit that Feliciano grew up into one hot piece of ass. If I was you, I would have been all over him the moment he first arrived, treating him like the Queen he will be and showing him off to everybody. We would be married right now and

wouldn't be leaving our room." He made disgusting kisses, embracing an invisible figure and it flared Ludwig to know who it could be.

"Until further notice, he's still my fiancé," Ludwig growled in reminder. He didn't need people telling him this, people that didn't understand, that didn't know.

"Well you have to act like it, especially now after you have some time to truly show him and fix this." Gilbert stood up, being reminded of things he was supposed to be doing. "Really, don't disappoint anybody in this trip," he told him lastly before he headed out.

"I won't," Ludwig made sure, although he hadn't fully understood what Gilbert truly meant with that.

This was a journey only for the Spheres of Validity and to repower King Khaos's confinements. Nothing else mattered, nothing else should distract, nothing else should it be given space to do …should it? No, Ludwig will not give it more chance, more thought- a job, a job, a job!

He caught sight of the collar still in the place Gilbert had last left it.

He ended up packing it... just for precaution.

All of Feliciano's things were packed, something that Queen Louis had helped him do, having to stand Feliciano's choice of simpleton and foolish things. He actually packed his cooking pots, special condiments, bags and bags of different kinds of pastas, sketchbooks and even flimsy things the children in the city had given to him as luck for the trip. Queen Louis would have thrown them away at the first chance she got, but Feliciano was too compassionate to do such a thing.

"Finally, we have finished!" Queen Louis declared as she made her way alongside Feliciano across the halls, now preparing for one final thing, and that was creating their Spheres of Validity.

"I'm so glad, I'm actually really nervous, but also really excited," Feliciano told her honestly.

"Both are appropriate. The trip is filled with all kinds of dangers, but thrilling opportunities, beauties and experiences that compare to no other. If you would have been married to Ludwig, you would have enjoyed it the more. It's almost like a honeymoon."

Feliciano soured, but smiled on to not show his distaste of that last comment, especially when he was talking to the person's grandmother and things were still rather bitter about his refusal.

"I think Ludwig and I will enjoy it still," he mentioned, just as they arrived before the throne room.

Feliciano trembled, for he hadn't entered the room before, which was usually reserved for certain occasions such as this one. Although now a days not as used as it had once been, it

was still a room of command and power, the true seat of the powers of the kingdom. Feliciano had always felt rather intimidated by it, even if such power was meant to lay on his shoulders and hands one day.

Once the guards opened the large doors from inside, Queen Louis entered with heightened ease, Feliciano following behind in shy and slow steps.

It was not as big as he expected, but its heights were still impressive, pillars strong and just, intricate windows letting in light to adorn the countless amount of paintings, sculptures and designs that flowed through the room like blood of power. Red of course shone, with gold, silver, marble and bronze, all until they reached the three impressive thrones at the bottom. The smallest one was for the jack, which stood at the left, the center with the largest for the King, the one to the right, for the Queen. He was breath taken at the beauty, weighted down by the power above him, around him, seeming to taunt him to sit, to claim it his own and start commanding as he should.

“Ah, finally,” the King welcomed.

Feliciano had been too distracted by the things around him to see that people were already there waiting for them. The rulers, as well as the arising rulers, were the only ones present. With a wave of Aldrich’s hand, the guards disappeared out into the hall to guard, so no one could disturb the process that was to occur. The Jack, from a chest he had brought, carefully took out three crystal clear orbs, light, like bubbles that could pop at any second.

“They arrived just earlier, directly from Rome, till this day the crafters that make the best bases from the ones in Hearts,” King Aldrich explained letting the Jack move in front so they could watch them. “From the very place we store them after being used. I assume you all remember them clearly.”

How could they forget? It was one of the worst nights of their lives. They cringed at the thought and still hid their faces in embarrassment, even Ludwig did.

“Opa, we were seven,” Ludwig reminded.

“That still doesn’t excuse the fact that you lost one and broke a window in the building! You’re lucky scouts got it back and the payment for the fix wasn’t as bad as I hoped.”

Ludwig rolled his eyes and maintained his gaze to the clear orbs now, not wanting to show clearer what he felt about the memory.

“Right, now, each of you, take one.”

And so they picked them up, dear in their hands, curious as they spun it in their holds. Aldrich then ushered them forward to move to an exact place in the tiles of the floor. It was a design of a night sky, a particular one, a story to it that not even the King and Queen knew. One star shone the brightest, and Aldrich placed each one at the top of a spike, close to their own throne. He didn’t explain why, it was just a formation the castle had been used to for centuries. He made sure they were all properly placed and then moved away, giving each the space they would need.

“We’re going to do this one by one, Feliciano’s power is still too great to mix well with the both of you, so we have to be careful and we have no time to get new Spheres, it has to work on this try.”

They pointed for Kiku to start, who stiffened, eyes only on the sphere, hands tight on it, waiting on the command of whatever it was that he was supposed to do.

“Kiku, focus all of your energy, and I mean all of it, unto it, but don’t let it escape or overflow.”

“Is that really it?”

“You have to give enough energy to help along with the rest to power a force field that will stand and cancel out a magic from a powerful being perhaps for the next fifty years. You’ll see that it will become hard to keep balance, and perhaps you will grow weak in the process, but we need you to maintain and continue it until the sphere deems itself complete.”

“Will I notice?”

“You’ll see and feel it,” was Aldrich’s last warning.

With a couple of deep breaths, Kiku thought that he should try it that instant then, get it over with quickly and be the test for all to see how it worked. He closed his eyes, centering his power within him, letting it then flow out through his hands and begin to power the orb. Only the outer shell began to light up in a soft pink, intensifying until it began to turn into a deeper red. By some natural feeling, Kiku begun to spun it in his hands, spreading the magic into the inner sphere like filling water, in reds and pinks that shone brighter and brighter along with the arising Jack. The light from outside seemed to have disappeared and Feliciano was impressed at the way Kiku’s contours shone, practically darkening him until all that existed from him was his magic and energy. His eyes were closed, but he knew that if he opened them, they would alight the room as well. The power was enough to have him lift up, fly across the full heights of the room if he wished, but it wasn’t complete, for suddenly it had all died down, stopped, the light turning off like someone had blown it away. Kiku was back on the floor, breathing heavily, leaning as he tried to find the energy in him to even stand, but it proved extremely hard after he gave all that energy to the sphere. It shone in reds and soft pinks, moving around the capture of the sphere like sand. Kiku stared to it impressed, even in his tiredness, in his weakness, so tempted to fall down to the cold hard floors and sleep there. The Jack ended up holding him so he wouldn’t fall or end up falling asleep.

“You can do this, Kiku,” he inspired.

He nodded, managing to stand even if it was a feat, holding proudly to his own sphere.

They all looked to Ludwig, expecting his turn now.

He started just as Kiku, with a breath, an inner focus, instead of pink, already starting in red, then turning into another darker red almost reaching black. He turned it, the sphere began to be filled with his power. He alighted, he floated, until finally it was done. He stumbled, his eyes showed his great tiredness, and it seemed like any single little poke was enough to have

him tumbling to the ground. No one would dare, and he glared over to his grandfather showing that he didn't need his help to continue to stand.

Ludwig's sphere shone in different shades of dark reds, contrasting very differently from Kiku's.

It was then Feliciano's turn, startled at the heavy gazes he got, trembling as he didn't know how exactly he should begin.

Where should his power start? How could he do a concentration like that? There had been the warnings that he was too powerful, what if he ended up breaking the sphere? What if he couldn't control it enough and end up hurting Ludwig and Kiku?

Time passed, the seconds haunting the room that continued to wait.

"Feliciano?" Queen Louis worried.

He would just have to try and hope for the best, hope that nothing bad would happen, and hope that he could control his power enough. He followed Ludwig and Kiku's example, began with calm, concentrated, forcing himself to only be a slight amount, but he felt the sphere begging for more, and like a crash he only offered what it wanted and needed. The light had been too bright to notice the color it had begun to glow, so much that the rest had to cover their own eyes to not fall blind. Feliciano arose just like the others did, but there was something different about it this time. He rose the highest, illuminating like a clear star, so much that King Aldrich feared that it was too much for the sphere to handle. He was about ready to shout at him to stop, but he was impressed by seeing what came next.

Marks arose on Feliciano's body, unlike anything they had ever seen, swirling in wonderful designs like vines on a pillar. His eyes were opened to shine, a golden spiked crown alighting his hair and the dim trace of wings behind him.

Before they could question any longer, it was gone, off, and Feliciano was suddenly dropped to the floor with a hmph. All traces of what just happened disappeared completely off him, sane, clear, if only a slight pain in his rear after his abrupt fall to the floor.

"Owwa…" he only uttered, trying to relieve himself by rubbing the affected areas and trying to stand again.

Luckily the orb was still in his hold, safe and usable, yet in quite the rare colors that had the room starring in disbelief. It shone in a unique red, a beautiful one that represented the most imperial shade, mixed also with gold, silver and bronze, in a blend never before witnessed in a Validity Sphere. Feliciano didn't seem to mind as he rubbed his head, more hurt instead of tired.

"Feliciano, are you all right?" The Queen asked.

"Ye-yes, ju-just a headache," he groaned. But other than that, he was perfectly fine, standing proudly and with enough force to run down the halls of the castle if he wished.

Everything had been so odd, they didn't know how to react, what to tell him, what to explain, because they didn't understand themselves what just happened.

To distract from that occurrence, Ludwig suddenly asked a very important question. "How are we supposed to bring these with us across all the four kingdoms? They're so large, I doubt they'll fit in any of our trunks and bags, and won't we get more? They easily attract attention." Especially Feliciano's.

"I'm glad you brought that up," King Aldrich said, turning away from them to move to his own throne, from its side taking out a scepter that mended well with the decorations of the room to be easily forgotten by anyone who was coming there for the first time. It was long and golden, a single red sphere at the top, rather insignificant actually.

"This is the king's scepter of course. It has been used by every King since the very first one, a symbol of your power and magic in the time to proclaim and make decisions. It has many uses, but one of its important ones is the deliverance of the Spheres of Validity. You're not supposed to be using this until being King, but because of the situation, we have no other choice." He handed it over, and Ludwig held it proudly…but he was still confused as to how exactly it was going to help them to carry the spheres. He gazed to it intently, but it showed now hint or design of how it could do it. He sent a questioning glance to his grandfather. Aldrich eased close, helping his grandson to hold it as he should, pointing to specific marks in the handle.

"Listen and learn well Ludwig, I won't be with you for when you have to carry the other ones." Making sure Ludwig's hands were still where he left them, he moved away, ready to explain.

"Now, all of you, offer your orbs to the scepter."

It was confusing at first, but they did exactly that, just awkwardly offer them to the scepter that was still in Ludwig's hand. Nothing still happened.

"Ludwig, with your power, now simply drag them into the scepter, you'll see for yourself, but remember to always keep your hold exactly like you are now if it's for the acceptance of orbs."

Ludwig looked conspicuously to both the scepter and the sphere that was in his hold, but did as he was told, pointing it forward and pumping his magic through it. Soon enough, the red orb alighted, the three spheres as well, and suddenly they disappeared out of their holds in a puff, leaving even smoke behind. The three looked around themselves, fearing over what had happened to them. Aldrich answered by pointing to the staff, and that's when they noticed three little lights glowing down the hold, still shinning in their distinct colors as they had made them, above nine dark sockets that were surely meant for the others. In the end, there should be twelve.

"They'll be safe in the scepter for the journey, but hide it well if you won't be holding it. Once you arrive to Clubs, King Ivan will explain what to do with them for the placing. Are we clear?" He looked to both Ludwig and Feliciano, a time for questions just not about the staff, but the journey in total.

It had been rather clear in their last minute preparations, they just wished they could be told more about their journey. They knew their every mode of transportation were assigned, with their lodging and even stays at the other castles, but if there were dangers, what would they be? What could they do to them? What if they went off the path? What if something happened? What were they supposed to do then?

“Everything will be fine,” Aldrich assured, “the road is rather simple and I’m sure many others will be guarding and watching over you, just look out for sudden dangers and protect each other when necessary.”

They nodded and hoped that it would be as he said. Maybe the rest were just exaggerating the dangers and complications to keep them better focus and alert. They couldn’t just risk the lives of the arising King and Queen in such a way. Ludwig and Feliciano kept repeating to themselves that all would go well, and that they would return in no time to settle what they were last doing.

It was just an orb placing and a visit around all four kingdoms, how bad could it be?

The three of them nodded, bowed, and began their exit from the room. They still had some last things to settle before their departure. With the doors closed, leaving the current rulers alone, they finally let their worry show, looking among themselves for the still evident question.

“What-what just happened to Feliciano?” The Queen was the first to ask.

“I wish I knew, but I had never seen such symbols, those forms. Did you go through something like that when you made your own Validity Sphere?” The Jack asked.

“Never, my magic never did such a thing.”

“Did the past Queen ever told you anything similar?”

“No, he never did, I didn’t see anything like that in my books.”

“Feliciano’s power always keep surprising me. I have never read or seen a Queen with so much magic. I wonder if it has to do with the fact that he’s Italian.”

“His Romulus line perhaps?”

They both then gazed to Aldrich, who had remained silent for this discussion, deep in thought. They hoped he perhaps knew something, but just like them, it was also a mystery to him.

Mio caro Feliciano,

The whole village knows about your coming trip, the messengers worked quick with their announcements, and I hope they’re also quick enough to let you receive this message just before leaving. My darling, I desperately hope that all goes well. I honestly say that I feared

this day and hoped it would never come, but alas, before I knew it, you're already preparing to leave. I'm scared of what some evil man can do to both you and Ludwig, but I'm also confident that you will both deal well. You're the grandson of a powerful soldier Feliciano, and no, your grandfather is not insisting over my shoulder to write that, but he is insisting that you smash whatever enemies with your pots if you have to. Surely it would not come to that, but still stand strong and I wish you great luck, an open mind to learn, my love and my deepest belief for you and Ludwig. I heard that when you return, you'll be stopping at Barga before heading back to Berlin, so when you do, the village will celebrate your return with a great feast. I'll be looking forward to it.

Safe trip, bambino mio.

Feliciano read, right at the entrance of the castle. They were expected to leave in this late night, cold, dark, with only dims lights in the entrance, making it the more obscure, like they were hiding some important treasure from being seen. The last trunk had just been packed inside the coach, and all that was missing were both the arising King and Queen, who still stood at the entrance with many others, wishing goodbyes, luck, and even handing of items that could help them. Feliciano saved the letter in his bag and turned towards Kiku, who was handing him a new blanket he could use for the trip, with soft fur that Feliciano instantly wanted to rest in. He embraced him in thanks, told him about how he was going to miss him and probably bring something for him from Spades. Kiku assured that he would work what he can to continue to find annulments while he was gone. He promised that when Feliciano returned, a breaking should be done and a coronation could finally be celebrated. He smiled and brought him to another deeper hug, one to which he shared with other cooks and servants he had dearly befriended. He said goodbye to Ludwig's parents, and received a choking hug from Gilbert. He bowed to the King, and he placed a hand of luck on his shoulder, wishing him safety, in deep earnest as Feliciano read in his hold and eyes. It was actually quite endearing and he felt tempted to hug him, but he knew Aldrich would refuse. He did share an embrace with the Queen, and she even ran a hand on the back of his hair, with the same wishes of everybody else, she even wiped a tear away when Feliciano began to move towards the coach. Ludwig gave them all quick goodbyes, last being the one with his grandfather. The same hand on his shoulder, the same words he wished Feliciano, and then the handing of a book with notes. It was unfamiliar to Ludwig, and he looked to it with question.

"This holds lessons as to how to connect your magic well with the Queen. We were expecting to train you in this matter once the counting for the coronation and wedding started, with haste and force since Feliciano's magic is more powerful than we had expected. It's quite dangerous still to let you deal with this alone, but being alone with Feliciano for so long, we don't know what kind of exposure of magic you both will have, so it's better you have this information now to better deal with it. The notes have medical procedures for if your burn or the magic turns for the worst. Use everything well," Aldrich advised last.

Ludwig thanked him and bowed, holding it tightly in his hold, assuring himself that he would start reading immediately. He headed towards the coach, where Feliciano was already waiting, prepared to go in, all ready to wave and watch them depart. But a sudden presence, a glowing interrupted, and all turned with both fear and impression to see a St. Mark lion enter the gates of the castle. He walked in with calm, slowly, regally, as a King would, a mighty presence that no guard dared go against. None of them did anything, they were too stupefied

in their spots to go against the creature. They continued to stare in both wonder and question, yet fearing what it would do once it halted right before the arising King and Queen. It sat and stared up to them, expecting something, but both the arising rulers were confused as to what.

Should they shoo it away? Had it been one that got lost? Was it a trained one that belonged to somebody in the city?

No, it came alone, with no rush, with no show of wanting to run away. Besides, there was just something different about this one, in regal reds and oranges, seeming to shine brighter than any they had ever seen, and then they noticed that it wore a rich jeweled ruby necklace around its neck, the very same design that decorated its torso and tail.

“Um, Hello,” Feliciano wished it.

Ludwig glared at him to stop, but to his surprise, the lion seemed to have understood, bowing as a greet. Ludwig felt like he should do the same, and so he did. Once the lion saw that it was given respect from both the arising rulers, it turned towards the crowd, specifically to the current King, Queen, Jack and the arising Jack, and he bowed to them as well, and they did so too as by some sudden decree they had to obey that instant.

“Wha-what is it?” Someone in the crowd asked.

“I have never seen one so obedient.”

“Where did it come from?”

“I feel Ace magic from it,” the Jack whispered to the other royals, instantly recognizing it, but not enough as to know exactly what this animal was.

After the heavy stare it had in the crowd, on the castle, on the very stars, it settled its gaze back on Feliciano, close, nose inching to where his hand fell beside him. Feliciano instantly understood and began to pet him as if he was a dog or cat he spotted on the streets. The lion answered well, purring and even nuzzling at the touch, wanting for more, the ever closer to Feliciano, who smiled and laughed, not fearing as he had earlier done.

It came as a surprise to the others, and all Ludwig could do was stare dumbfounded, questioning gazes to the crowd, debating if he should stop this and get Feliciano in the coach or let it continue as so for it could disrespect whatever this creature was. He had to admit that he was rather jealous of the acceptance the lion had for Feliciano, how the arising Queen could play with its fur and cradle him, and he was just standing there awkwardly.

Before he could omit anything, they witnessed as the creature’s glow intensified, blinding it completely, growing smaller, smaller, and smaller until it disappeared and what was left in Feliciano’s arm was a miniature. It was almost like a small firing kitty, but it still held its mane, the jewelry now turned into symbols on its fur, his wings tucked safely along with his tail, now falling into sweet rest in the arms of the arising Queen. Feliciano quietly cooed at it, scratching its mane and neck for it to lay more comfortable, and it was just too adorable to let go, to leave, somehow he felt like he was meant to bring it along with him on the trip. He headed towards the entrance of the coach, readily with it, not minding at all this sudden

companion to the journey. Ludwig gazed to the King and Queen expecting a scold of denying.

“It has Ace magic,” the Jack told him.

“I feel like…” the Queen gazed over to the sky, as if she could see the powerful beings right before them, “they sent him.”

All agreed, all approved, shivers arose, but what a blessing it still was, what an opportunity never before witnessed.

Feliciano went into the coach, choosing a spot to tuck himself into, cradling the small creature lovingly, the arising Queen himself close to joining him in rest. Ludwig gazed to it, not believing how a powerful creature from the Aces easily accepted and laid with Feliciano as if it was an old companion, a dear friend. It was best to leave it as that, best to let it come, best to let this begin.

“We’re off,” Ludwig declared, not wanting to stall any more time, heading inside to join Feliciano and closing the doors harshly behind him. Ludwig tapped a certain area on the ceiling and the horses understood, neighing and officially starting course. With no rider to take them, the horses knew well where to go and were specifically chosen for this, and so the rest could confide they could arrive to their next stop safe and quick.

Through the window in the back, Feliciano raised and looked to the crowds that wished them goodbye, shouting and giving exaggerated waves that Feliciano wished he could share with as well, but couldn’t with the confines of the space and the hold of the St. Mark. He settled with simple waves and wording out with his lips messages that he hoped they would understand. They were pass the gates of the castle, into the streets, heading to the exit, the castle turning smaller and smaller the more far away they went, the people now gone, for Feliciano to not see for as long as this trip would last. He settled back, looking straight to the decorated wall of the coach, then to the side, where Ludwig rested, head leaning against the window, eyes tired, he wanted to sleep.

Feliciano sighed. This would be his company, this would be who he should trust, who he depended on, and who could protect him.

Turned away from each other, as if another night in their own room, Feliciano decided he should rest as well against his own side, petting the creature still. It would be a while until they got to their next stop.

Chapter End Notes

I will be starting 2017 with a new arc. You guys are in for a lot. The coming arc will be pretty intense, it was honestly one of my favorite things to imagine in the AU and I’m so eager to already write it and show it to you guys. We’ll explore different cultures of this world, we’ll get to see Ludwig and Feliciano’s relationship grow and change (we all

know to what ;)), but we'll also see as ancient secrets are revealed and the course of this world's history changes. I hope that you remain in 2017 to see it. Happy New Year!

EDITED: 1.11.2024

Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

First chapter of the year! Let's begin and I hope you guys enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They had traveled throughout the whole night, Feliciano waking up to find the coach still in constant motion. To his surprise, Ludwig slept on, and Feliciano, after opening the curtains to see what lay outside, could not understand how he could let himself ignore all this beauty, tall mountains of green and snow, plentitude of red flowers, villages, fresh air, a road that continued on with promise of more to see. Feliciano was breath taken, tempted to wake up Ludwig so he could witness it all as well. He stuck his head out, wanting to take more of that natural smell, see beyond what the walls of the coach impaired him to. He caught sight of the horses, continuing to drive them forward, no matter the cold, no matter the weight or how tired they probably were. A lake was coming soon into their vicinity, shinning splendidly, with good pasture and he knew he had to take the chance.

Following Ludwig's example from last night, he tapped at the coach ceiling, catching the horses' attention. "You guys must be thirsty and tired, please, let's stop to have a drink and you all can rest for a while." He pointed to the place, hoping that they understood enough. They seemed to have since they took a sudden turn, closer towards the splendor, right by a tree that would give excellent shade.

It was the sudden movements that had Ludwig awakened, groaning, rubbing his eyes while stretching, looking around him as if to realize where he was.

"We're making a quick stop so the horses can refresh."

"Did you tell them to?"

"Of course! They've been awake the whole night! It's only a quick stop. We're pretty close to the station anyways." He moved all curtains, even the ones in Ludwig's side apart. "The views are absolutely stunning. You just have to look, Ludwig," he pointed, hoping it had peeked his curiosity enough. Ludwig still looked tired and uncaring, but at least his eyes were frozen on the distances, on the trees, and the height of a church from a near village.

The coach finally came to a stop, and at that very moment Feliciano came down, after leaving the St. Mark in a comfortable position on his earlier seat. He took off the reigns from the horses and lead them forward, with space for them to drink, to rest, or just walk what they wanted without the weight of the coach and its riders. It was such a beautiful lake, large, with a clear shore, and Feliciano was tempted to take off everything and join in its depth, but sadly they didn't have enough time.

It was finally nice to have this space to move, a tranquil spot that they could have the breakfast he had packed. He went to get it just as Ludwig was coming down, relieved as Feliciano was even if he didn't word it. He went forward, just as taken, just as tempted to let the water feel every inch of his skin. It was an enchanting place, the sand soft underneath his feet and every brush of wind seemed to want him to fall down and rest. Feliciano then rushed at his side, taking seat, Ludwig noticing that the St. Mark decided to switch his rest at the top of his curled hair. It was like another bed to him. Feliciano took out various pieces of bread along with jars of jam, bottles of milk, and packages of coffee from the basket he brought. Not his preferred way, but he was sure that an ounce of magic could help. Once he took what he wanted, he offered the basket kindly for Ludwig to take. Without giving him a glance, Ludwig took his own portions, more so than Feliciano since he was used to heavier breakfasts, but they couldn't cook eggs and sausages at that moment. Hopefully that would change once they stayed at their lodgings and arrival to the Diamond castle.

They had their breakfast in calm silence, eyes on the horizon of the lake, meeting with the rise of a beautiful hill. Soon enough Feliciano was done with his meal, sitting more attentive to the wind, the distant bells of the village and the hooves of the horses as they explored the shore. With sudden movement on the top of his hair, Feliciano remembered the little lion was resting there, awakened and now playing with a distinct curl that blew along with the wind. He chuckled, took him into his arm and began playing with it, tickling it and letting it try to chase and bite his finger. It was rather gentile so he didn't mind it.

"We should name it," Feliciano suddenly interrupted the serene air.

"It's probably from the Aces. It surely has a name already."

"Then why didn't he tell us. We can't just go the whole journey calling it the lion."

"It's easier."

"No, help me name him." Feliciano raised it, turning it as he guessed a fitting name. He hummed, stayed thinking for the longest while, even when Ludwig was done, noticing that the horses were moving further away and was about to stand up and get them. "Guido!" Feliciano started.

"Why does it have to be Italian?"

"So you want something German? Okay um, Wolfgang!"

"I hate that name."

"I think it sounds fancy, and like…a gang of wolves."

"This is a lion."

"True…I think it's best if we use another language then."

Ludwig rolled his eyes and left him to get the horses, while Feliciano suggested different names in Spanish, Swedish and even Japanese. By the time he returned to place them on the

reins, Feliciano was still not sure on one, sad for he wanted it to be instant, to continue the rest of the journey with a knowing name to their new member.

“You can name it Pookie for all I care, but get on the coach already, we can’t be stalling time.”

Feliciano suddenly jolted in elation, eyes glowing at whatever sudden realization.

“Pookie!” He said it aloud.

“Uh…”

“We’ll name it Pookie!”

“I just…came up with the name, it wasn’t meant to-”

“I like it! It’s perfect! Do you like it?”

The lion didn’t seem to mind, nuzzling itself in Feliciano’s arm, quite accepting to it.

“Pookie? It sounds ridiculous.”

“You’re the one that suggested it, and no, we’re not taking it back! It’s official, his name is Pookie!” He introduced with a pout…quite adorable Ludwig had to admit, which had him rolling his eyes to not show his blush or attention.

“Just get in the coach!” He commanded, reaching exasperation.

Feliciano decided to obey and go in.

They continued on their road, ignorant to the other, both distracted with their own views in their own sides. The only sounds were those of Feliciano’s comment as he talked to…Pookie, pointing the littlest details that just flew by to Ludwig.

Another night was reaching, and finally they could notice the deep glow of their next coming city. It wasn’t the largeness and plentitude of Berlin, but Hamburg still shone as beautiful, as spectacular, and Feliciano was so happy and excited he stuck his head out to witness it more, to feel this new air, for Ludwig to see this time.

“Would you get back in the coach!” Ludwig had constantly told him, but it never worked, Feliciano always found his chance to do it, to greet passerbies, to point to distinct buildings, the sweet smell of some of the restaurants and romantic roads that he wanted to loose himself in.

Sadly, this was not for sightseeing or exploring, but only for their arrival at a distinct train station that was only available there in all of Hearts. It was the fastest way to get to Diamonds, giving them a sure arrival of two days to the city of Amiens, where they would then depart to the capital, Paris.

The coach continued until it arrived before that very station, where already they received a warm welcome from the crowds, who came to witness a visiting from the prince and the arising Queen, especially after the news they made all across the kingdom. They shouted and tried to scream their greets above the others, too many for Feliciano to properly greet back, only managing some of the close ones. They were hurried by guards down their reserve space, the same ones who offered to take their luggage.

A train was already waiting for them, and Ludwig and Feliciano were taken to one of the front wagons, surely the one meant for high class due to its luxurious decorations, dark reds, white and gold, the seats more comfortable than even the ones from their coach, and with space for tables and even beds. Their trunks were packed above them, the area practically deserted with only the extra presence of two other pairs: Two old women, and two other young ones, whispering among themselves surely about them. Feliciano smiled and waved to them, and they did the same, and Ludwig had to push him back, with a scolding glare to behave and stay silent. Pookie flew above their area, looking curiously out the window as to place themselves to where they were, but also curious about the glow of one of the tall lamps.

The train was then ready and it settled off, fast, but somehow the inside of the train was made to make it relaxing, so they wouldn't feel the rushing movements, and so it came easy to rest into the night, no matter the sceneries, no matter their entrance into the Scandinavian provinces of the Hearts kingdom.

Breakfast was served by some attendants, a luxury only available to those of their cart. The tables were richly prepared for each, not a chance to speak to the other riders, who Feliciano had a distinct need to talk to and get to know. Ludwig kept catching him glancing back, to the point that it was not letting him enjoy his breakfast in peace.

"What's so special about them that you can't focus on your food and eat?" He asked, taking a piece of chocolate that Feliciano had ignored in favor of the women in the back.

"It's just so silent and boring. We should spend time with them so we can all enjoy our ride," he suggested. Now that he said it, maybe he could finally commit to it and stand, let them join all together in a table.

Ludwig held him harshly by the arm, wanting to force him back on his seat. "This is not meant to be a vacation, Feliciano," he reminded.

"It's just a little chat Ludwig, it's not going to hurt the trip." He removed himself from his hold, and tired of his commanding attitude, went forward to them ignoring his glare and trying reach to get him back.

"Salve Signore," he greeted with open arms and a friendly smile to all.

Ludwig watched as the other four smiled and greeted him just as friendly, all accepting him easily to their presence. Feliciano suggested that they all unite their tables and sit together in the center. Ludwig reluctantly had to join, settling with his calm in drinking some coffee. The

other five chatted happily, filling the once depressing empty wagon with stories, jokes, and any tiny little things that would get them to know each other in the time they had.

Both of them were loving couples from the Germanic province who were visiting the Diamond Kingdom for a romantic getaway. With the news spreading well across the kingdom, the four of them knew Ludwig and Feliciano's reasoning for the trip, but they still asked how they were feeling about it, what they were expecting and if they had plans to do other things than just getting the Spheres of Validity. Feliciano did much of the answering, Ludwig sternly looking out the window to the views, hoping they would be able to pass over the sea bridge soon. Too preoccupied they were with their conversation that they didn't notice as the train took a sudden slowness, dwindling, only Ludwig suddenly being aware of it. At first, he thought it was just some momentary mechanical problem, but it continued on, shakes from time to time, then crashes and shouts. Feliciano and the women continued to speak unaware, and since he really wasn't offering anything to the conversation, they wouldn't mind if he stood to check this out. Pookie, after being bored with some sugar cubes he had been playing with, decided to fly off and follow the arising King.

Ludwig reached the very bottom of the wagon, a curtain covering a window that surely showed to the ones behind them. He only raised it slightly, watching to the other side, passengers all looking to their own back, nervous, panicking, some of the attendants becoming extremely nervous as they tried cover their own door.

What was going on? He was just about ready to open the door and offer his help, when he got his answer. A small crash, smoke arose, screams continued, the wagon became wild as they tried to find hiding spots, away from the three black cloaked figures that entered. Ludwig remembered those cloaks and symbols well, and panic easily settled in him watching as they searched, pushing people and threatening with knives and swords. He instantly knew for what, and he had to run and warn, especially after they spotted him through the window.

Feliciano and the women had finally stood, those last noises enough of a clamor for them to notice.

"Ludwig, what's going on?" Feliciano asked with clear concern. Pookie flew over to his arms for protection.

"Quickly! All of you, get your things!" He demanded, and so they all did, getting their trunks, for even if they weren't told, they knew something was happening.

"But, Ludwig..." Feliciano still wanted to know, trying to hold two of his trunks.

They were too much, and Ludwig came to the realization that they'll just have to leave some behind. What was important was bringing the trunk where the scepter was in.

"Come on, come on, come on," he rushed them forward to the frontal door, where many of the attendants had come from.

He let the ladies enter first, and just as Ludwig and Feliciano were to go in, a sudden blast interrupted, and the men had finally reached what had been their wagon. Smoke filled the room and one of the empty compartments was destroyed. Luckily Ludwig wrapped an arm

around Feliciano, covering him well with his back from any of the pieces that flew towards them.

As the fog cleared, Feliciano noticed the others, coming closer, jumping over anything that had fallen with their aim clearly on them.

“Lu-Lu-Ludwig!” Feliciano panicked, trying to move them both away.

Ludwig pushed him forward to the other wagon, closing the door behind him, making sure that the rest moved ahead enough so he could use magic. He created a strong shield, enough to stall them so they could rush forward. The other inhabitants who had been there continued with rush to the more frontal wagons, but at least leaving doors opened to let them all pass quickly. Ludwig didn’t move until the settling of shields were done, and Feliciano didn’t until Ludwig came and reached for him, both of them coming together in a surprising hold, rushing forward.

Three wagons up, Ludwig had placed four shields, one the cloak figures had destroyed, currently trying to tumble down the third. All the attendants, along with the four women, Feliciano and Ludwig, were now stuck in the last wagon, to which they had to share with the conductor, still having to drive this train no matter what was going on and control the magic that powered it, but he showed the same panic as the rest. Ludwig had to think something quick.

“Wha-what do they want?” Feliciano asked.

“Isn’t it obvious? They’re trying to stop us, Feliciano. Kill us and take the scepter with the Validity Spheres before we reach the field."

“Already? We just started!”

“That’s the journey for you.” Ludwig was getting exasperated, pacing the floors, still thinking.

“We have to attack them!” One attendant suggested.

“How can we without risking the lives of everybody here?”

“What else can we do? There’s nowhere else to go and those men would stop at nothing until they get the prince and the arising Queen,” one of the women said.

They continued fighting over what they should do, Ludwig wanting to get something sure in his own mind.

If they fought and tried to rid them in the train, there was a great risk to the passengers, risk that they could fail, risk that they could lose the scepter. He looked out a small window this wagon held, the train close to passing a large lake in the distance. He stared for the longest while until he decided.

“Feliciano and I will jump,” he declared, taking their things and placing them near the window, to take into their arms when it happened.

“What?” Feliciano was the first to ask incredulously. He looked out the window and spotted only but harsh ground and tall trees from below the track bridge.

“They’re only after us, and I will not risk the life of anybody else for this. It’s best if they follow us elsewhere.” Ludwig pointed the lake to Feliciano, hoping he’d understand where he wanted them to fall in.

It brought some sort of ease…but still!

“Ludwig, we’re nowhere near diamonds. We don’t know where we’ll be. If we fall there, where should we go? What if those guys come chasing after us?” Feliciano asked fearfully, helping him with the things still, Pookie now holding himself from Feliciano’s shoulder as they moved across the wagon.

“What’s the nearest station from here? Does it stop before the crossing of the Georgiatian sea?” Ludwig asked one of the attendants with order.

“Copenhagen, a couple of minutes and the sea bridge is reached.”

“We’ll just walk there,” Ludwig accepted, without thinking of the trouble of distance.

“What?” Feliciano shouted once again.

“It’s the best option right now. We’ll explain the situation and take the next available train to Amiens.”

“Your highness, it is still a risky-” A bang was heard, the third shield was down with only two to go.

“Give me a good map!” Ludwig ordered, and some of the assistants quickly went to find one, handing the arising King the biggest and best one.

“They’ll come chasing after us instead and leave the train alone. So Feliciano-” he grabbed his attention, Feliciano being so nervous and scared he was actually shivering, hands rubbing on his arms as if he was cold. Ludwig had to place his hands on his shoulder, focusing his glances and even being only on him. “Feliciano, I need you to focus!” And then he did something that he had only done back when they were children, and that was move away the fall of his bangs that were covering his teary and fearful eyes sweetly behind his ear, straightening him so he could only look up to him, with a caring look in his eyes that made Feliciano think for a moment that he got lost back in time. “We’re going to fall into the lake, swim as fast as we can with our stuff, and run, got it, we’re going to run! Don’t care about directions, we just need to get ourselves as far away from them as possible, got it? We did it once, we can do it again.” A sweet tone, a believing aura, Feliciano actually nodded, confident in his words, joining at his side, the lake coming ever closer, just as the second shield broke, with only one missing.

“We’ll help stall what we can,” one of the older women suggested, bravely standing strong, as if ready to use whatever little she had to offer help and defense to her rulers.

“Make sure that they saw where we went. Do what you can to push them off and follow us,” Ludwig wanted to make clear.

Ludwig pulled Feliciano closer, standing and calculating how exactly they should throw themselves out, just as the workers got some things that were thrown around the space to use as weapons. They all stood like warrior prepared to face war, and with their amounts, their faith, and the force ready in their preparation of their holds, Ludwig knew they would do well to drive them off the train and get it back on normal course.

The window was opened, rushing wind blowing on both his and Feliciano’s hair as he got on its side, bringing Feliciano with him with a strong hold of his waist, Pookie on his shoulder. Finally the lake was beneath them, Ludwig waiting for the exact moment to dive to be closer to a shore to swim to.

“Hold on to me, hide your eyes on my shoulder if you need to.” Feliciano instantly did so, holding tightly to him enough to darken everything else. “We’ll be all right, I assure you, no harm will come to either of us.” He told him lastly, finding the perfect spot, taking that forceful jump, along with the hold of their things and his arising Queen, just as he heard the bang of the last shield being destroyed.

They were quickly met with the smash of cold and harsh water, Ludwig laying against it so Feliciano didn’t had to go through the slap. Feliciano still held tightly to him as Ludwig swam to surface, their things floating to work as good items to grasp themselves to while Ludwig looked to which direction they should swim to. He chose north, with a quick shore coming into view, ready to paddle them quickly, but to his surprise, a sudden transformation occurred and Pookie was back to his normal lion size, offering help, both of them holding tightly to the animal, along with their things, as he quickly got them to shore. It was short, and by the time they reached the sandy ground, Pookie was back to a small kitty size that could perch itself easily at Feliciano’s shoulder.

“Really?” Ludwig scolded him, but they couldn’t question any longer.

The train passed, no other figures landing in the lake, but as it drove by, they noticed the group of cloaked men fall into the forest. The fall to harsh ground would buy them some time, so Ludwig knew they had to use it.

“Come on.” Uncaring if they were cold and wet, Ludwig held Feliciano by the wrist and dragged him quickly onward, just as he said, without direction, with haste, what mattered was getting away from them.

The woods were dark, grim, and the cold air only stuck more to the drench of their clothes, skin and hair. No matter how tired Feliciano got, Ludwig pushed him onward, especially feeling this dark magic above them, surely by the men, and when Feliciano looked back, he noticed that they were being chased, with more than just the ones that were on the train.

“L-Ludwig,” Feliciano wanted to warn.

"Just keep running,” he insisted with a shout, and Feliciano could do nothing more than to obey.

Magic infused arrows were being shot at them, luckily ones they avoided, Feliciano hiding Pookie inside his coat so he wouldn't be harmed. Sadly it wasn't the luck Ludwig was given. He was shot at his leg, tripping with a harsh groan. Of course Feliciano stopped and kneeled down to him to aid. "Ludwig! What happened?"

"My damn leg." He was pissed.

"Ju-just ca-calm down, or it get's worst!"

"Calm down now?" He shouted.

With the coming shouts of the men, he forced himself to stand, despite the pain, wanting to continue, taking Feliciano's hold once again and pulling them forward even with the slowness, his groans, the continuous pangs escalating through his whole leg now. The men were coming close, the symbols in their cloaks enough for Feliciano to see clearly. The arising Queen tried offering help with his own hold, but in the end it wasn't enough, it was just the stalling the men needed to reach, for them to extend their arms, an array of ropes controlled skillfully flying into the air to instantly have wrapped around Feliciano until he fell to the floor, trapped in their tightening.

"Feliciano!" Ludwig shouted, trying what he could to rid of the ropes, but they were too tight, and with the amount of low energy he held, it wasn't enough to break and free him.

New ropes were thrown and now they were trapped around him, laying him even more defeated on the ground. He only managed a free hand, which tried to keep a touch or some sort of hold on Feliciano. The men came close, to claim them, capture them as they surely wanted, and it flared Ludwig with great anger.

"Don't you dare touch him! Don't you dare do anything to him!" He growled with intense anger, but seeing as he was still tied and he couldn't do anything but grip harshly at Feliciano's coat, the men ignored the threat, taking Feliciano's quivering figure to stand, forcing him to walk forward to the direction they wanted.

More men had to come to maintain Ludwig, who constantly trashed, trying to aim a kick or arm on them, his magic worthless, the ropes had something in them that stopped his connection with his power.

"I swear, if he gets the tiniest cut, I'll make you all pay! Do you hear me! I won't hesitate to cut off your heads if I have to!"

They ended hitting him in the back of his head to black him out and fall, making it easier for them to move, even if they had to carry his heavy body with difficulty. Feliciano screamed his name in concern, but it was muffled with a handkerchief wrapped around his mouth.

The men were more at ease, laughing with pride, pushing the two figures deeper into their woods, with way to their base, all for young purple eyes to witness in hiding.

Chapter End Notes

EDITED: 10.11.2024

Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

> Damn, 30 chapters….and we're nowhere near done. Still, it is a pleasure and an adventure to write. Hope you enjoy this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ludwig groaned harshly as he began to awake, feeling all this new pain suddenly weight upon him, dizzying him, an effort to just focus his eyes in whatever place he found himself now. It was rocky, damp, two torches only, giving a dim lighting to his surroundings. Different things were scattered around him, like he was stuck in some utility closet. The only two things he recognized was one of his trunks and the scepter, thrown carelessly on the ground. The three orbs still glowed on its hold, giving him a breath of relief to know that they were not taken…yet.

"Ludwig?" Feliciano's sweet voice, closely behind him. That's when he noticed that they were both tied together, facing away from the other.

"Are you all right? Did they touch you? Did they do anything to you?" He immediately asked.

"No, they were kind of afraid to."

"Why were they?"

"I don't know, they were speaking a weird language, I barely understood them. Whatever it was, I knew it was the reason they didn't decide to kill us."

That was a sort of relief. "Any idea to where we are?"

"They blindfolded me half way, I didn't see, but we moved a long distance, I think we're in a cave."

Ludwig looked around and it seemed like it, and as he gave more ear, he heard echoes, of dripping water and dim voices. He tried moving out of the confinements, but as he expected, the rope was tight and it was a magic blocker, their power of no use to help them out of there.

"Why didn't they take the scepter? Surely they're looking for the spheres."

"They didn't recognize them. They threw it the moment they thought it was worthless. They were searching through the trunks we brought. They think we were carrying the actual spheres there."

“All right, we have…some chance." He extended his leg to grab the scepter, inching it closer to himself just in case. Better to have that in his grasp more than anything if they somehow managed an escape. “Where’s Pookie?”

“I don’t know, I’m extremely worried about him.”

“Wasn’t he hiding in your coat?”

“I felt him fly off the moment I got wrapped in those ropes.”

Ludwig groaned. “To be an animal sent from the Aces, he’s not really doing anything.”

“Hey! I’m sure he’s trying!” Feliciano tried to hit him with his shoulder, insulted.

“Well he could have sent us some help.”

Not wanting to continue on the subject of the lion, he was silent as he searched, noticing that the only thing that created the walls of their imprisonment was simple wood. Ludwig thought that it they pushed enough, maybe they could have it fall over. They were still tied though, and they really needed to get rid of those ropes first. Their magic was what would help them go against the men with force and make the exit they wanted.

“Any ideas on how to get rid of this?” He moved his wrists.

“There’s a knife over there,” Feliciano pointed with his free foot to one that lay at the top of some crates in the corner of the room. It was far, they couldn’t possibly reach like this, but noticing that their legs weren’t that bound, maybe they could try something. Ludwig bounced, Feliciano was surprised, but it quickly showed what they could do when they moved an inch closer to the crates. They continued until Feliciano’s legs could easily tap the boxes. Now all he needed to do was reach up and he’d- there was a sudden rippling in the hardened walls, like water instead of rocks.

Feliciano quickly brought his foot down in fear, seeing as the rippling began to turn purple, until a figure fell skillfully on the box, picking up the knife for them. Pookie flew off the man’s shoulder, going over to cuddle at Feliciano’s cheek.

“Pookie! There you are!” He was so relieved, cuddling back into his own mane that he almost forgot about the person that had come.

He was young, surely a teenager, grayish white hair, shinning violet eyes, pale, no uniformed symbol or color in his clothes that was familiar to Feliciano or Ludwig.

“Your highness,” he bowed in respect to both, jumping down to the ground and quickly releasing them from their bounds. They relished on standing, on moving their legs and bodies as they wished, and the first thing Feliciano did was hug the stranger.

“Grazie mille!” He practically sang, to the discomfort of the teen.

“Feliciano!” Ludwig scolded, pulling him back. “We don’t know who this is, it could be a trick!” Ludwig glared, holding Feliciano close to him.

“Relax, I’m honestly here to help you both escape. If you don’t believe me-” the boy moved his shirt to reveal a special Heartian tattoo symbol on his shoulder, one specifically from Iceland, one of Hearts’s many distant islands. It worked as enough proof to show them that he was in no way connected to the men that captured them. “Name is Emil. Now, do you guys have everything you need and can you use a knife?” He pulled back his shirt to hide the tattoo, inspecting the room, then throwing two knives he held in his flimsy vest, for Ludwig and Feliciano to grab. It caught them unguarded, but they still nodded and held the knives, although albeit questioning. Ludwig still took the surviving trunk, where he saved the scepter with some clothes and the book he was given by his grandfather.

“All right, here’s the plan,” he ushered them to a corner of the space, a little hole for him to see movement on the other side, guards placed there to watch the arising King and Queen. “I’m waiting for a signal, once I see it, we’ll come out and attack the men here. I’ll let you know if we can move any forward.”

“Signal? From who?” Ludwig questioned.

“You’ll meet them soon enough, but what’s important right now is getting you all out of here."

“Why can’t you conjure that magic you used to come in?” Feliciano wondered.

“I haven’t really mastered it. It was incredibly risky and some of these men could have sensed it, and we can’t call attention right now.” He maintained his heavy sight on the room, until a familiar, large beaked bird in white and black, landed upon a distinct corner of the hall that was beyond the woodened wall. The men didn’t see any threat in it, just thought it was from the area and had managed an entrance looking for food. One man shooed it away, but it was enough for Emil to get the message.

“Now,” he commanded.

They prepared their knives, infused magic into it, took breaths, gathered strength and burst out. Emil was quick, dashing to knock unconscious two men, kicking and cutting with ease. Ludwig followed behind in offering strong punches and forceful lunges, especially with vengeance after they dared take the arising King and Queen so easily. Feliciano just… followed behind them, quivering, only giving a cut here and there with his fire infused knife, which was a little help to having all the men in the area down on the floor.

Luckily, with its great quickness, there was barely any sound but that of thuds, and as Emil glanced to another tunnel of the cave, they were too far from other groups for them to have noticed. He checked around until he got another signal, the bird once again.

“Come on,” he ushered the both of them to follow, Ludwig taking Feliciano’s hand dearly and leading them both behind Emil.

Emil quickly knocked out anyone that had been passing by those tunnels, leading them down different ones that spread through the whole ground or mountain. It had both the rulers realizing that the cave was practically like a maze, wondering how Emil made his way around it so surely. Occasionally they would find themselves in new rooms, new chambers, in

which they had to attack, luckily small groups of men, in quietness as to not attract too much attention, but it didn't work. Soon enough reinforcements were called and they were beginning to be chased down. Emil just knew how to move them about easily, following the constant signals of the bird, until in their running it settled perch on his shoulder, with calm even with its owners rapid movements and exalted nervousness and worry.

"We're close, I'm sure of it! Okay, once we're out we're going to-"

All three came to a sudden halting stop when they saw what was before them. All the men in the area, in a large crowd, together, instantly facing to the three who had caused great damaged across the cave. The three of them stilled, knowing and fearing that they couldn't go through this so easily. Each man took out a weapon or prepared some dark magic, devious smirks knowing of the victory that awaited them. They knew they weren't supposed to be killing them, but they could still do enough damage to get them to stop with escapades and settle for the last time. Despite the heaviness, Emil still took a stance, Ludwig joining him, a more protective hold on Feliciano as he prepared to use a strong fire spell that could probably offer them some kind of escapade between them. He knew the exit would be coming close.

When they were ready for the lounge, that Ludwig didn't know if he would survive or not, for a moment wishing he could have- there was a sudden rumbling, enough of a shake to cause rocks to fall and dust to arise. Ludwig held Feliciano closer to him, fearing an earthquake, willing to use himself as a shield from anything that would fall. He was about to offer the same protection to Emil when he heard shouts of battle, happy as if they were already singing victory. It didn't come from any of the men, since they stood just as confused about the commotions and sounds.

And that's when something blew, Ludwig later realizing an entire wall of the cave. He brought Emil and Feliciano down just on time to not have any of the sudden boulders and rocks landing on them. It helped to bury many of the men, to distract them, to keep them in question and haze as they tried to place themselves with the situation.

When the air cleared, Ludwig thought he was just hallucinating now, because in no way did a large ship just suddenly come in, with a large tripulation of men giving hollered screams, dressed in heavy wear, holding large axes and swords, raining down and attacking fiercely Khaos's men.

"Wha-what?" Ludwig really tried to make sense, wondering if they should fall at ease or continue to shield Feliciano as he had done.

The brunette actually held large brightened eyes, excited with what he was seeing, bouncing and clapping his hands like it was all some show only prepared for him.

"Vikings!" Feliciano exclaimed.

"Joker Vikings," Emil wanted to add.

To Ludwig, that was worst, but Feliciano didn't mind it at all. In his teachings he had read the Jokers were not really as bad as people though, in fact it was better them than being captured by Khaos's men.

“Emil! Emil! Emil!” A voice called in the plentitude of screams, of swinging axes, battle cries and even savage blood fest that Ludwig covered Feliciano’s eyes and ears to.

“Lukas! Over here!” Emil began to wave, catching the attention of one of the few slim figures.

Very light blond hair, pale, violet eyes, a distinct ruby encrusted cross parting part of his hair. Feliciano easily recognized it as a Norwegian province token given to high sorcerers. He saw it was worthy of his wear when he saw the man use a distinct spell of webs and lights, creating in a quick sphere around him to have a group of Khaos’s men flying off from his path when he released the force, giving him easier access to Emil.

“Are you all right? Did you do well? Did you get them?” He asked in fret, hands all over the younger to make sure nothing had befallen him.

“I’m fine! I told you it wasn’t going to be a big deal, here they are even,” he pointed to Ludwig and Feliciano.

Lukas bowed with respect to the both of them, “your highness.”

“Aces! That’s actually the Prince! And the arising Queen!” Came a sudden shout, the man clearer to them after he had rid another group of men with his powerful and large Axe.

Ludwig and Feliciano were instantly terrified. They never knew Axes could grow that large, so well crafted, dark and already wanting to cut with a single gleam. Not even Antonio’s collection was that intimidating. The person got closer, spiked blond hair and grinning smile, both as wild as the mess around them, towering high and holding well the strength in himself, the needed to just hold that ax and to also probably fight on well even without it.

“Bow down and show some respect,” Lukas scolded him.

“Oh, of course, your highness." He did the usual bowing, quite exaggerated. “Mathias Køhler, at your service.”

A sudden whistle was called, from a small man in the ship. “We don’t know if the ones that ran away are going to bring reinforcements. So I suggest you all hurry up and get up!” He called, a sweetness mixed in his commanding tone.

Most of Khaos’s men were gone, unconscious, had run away or even… lay dead. It had settled so well that Ludwig and Feliciano could be introduced to these men in tranquility.

“Please, your highness, come with us,” Mathias pointed to the ship.

Feliciano was ready to run off, but Ludwig was ever so hesitant, not feeling so confident in any kind of Jokers.

“Ludwig, come on,” Feliciano tried to convince him.

“Feliciano, can we be sure? I don’t know if-”

“Please, your highness, you can trust us, we know what this journey means to all four kingdoms, and although our crimes, we are loyal to the crown and don’t have any kind of ill intents against any of you,” Lukas convinced, but Ludwig still faltered in his place.

“Hurry up! A scout just confirmed our guessing on more men coming and we don’t know if they’re more equipped and powerful, so we have to go, now!” The same man commanded once again from the ship.

Ludwig decided he was not going to deal with that threat alone, especially having to watch over Feliciano and the trunk that still held the scepter. If these Viking men threatened or proved too dangerous, Ludwig thought he would just have to plan an escape from them, but with their kindness, their help as they rushed towards the ship, he was starting to believe it would be very less likely.

Along with the arising King and Queen, the rest of the men of whatever crew this was began to run back, stepping wildly across the ship as they raised themselves back on its deck, trained and known. Ludwig was rather embarrassed that he had to use a rope ladder. Mathias offered to take the trunk, jumping with precision on the deck, waiting patiently for them to set foot.

The ship was big, as expected of such a large crew, ready to accommodate all of them, even the two new members. Once they made sure everyone was on board, anything that was used to keep the boat in the cave was raised. Ludwig and Feliciano watched impressed as all the men took out a sort of cross, similar to the one Lukas wore on his hair. By the call of the man that had shouted to them earlier, each one placed their own in some intricate hole for them, alighting, magic shinning in the entire boat in ancient runes. It ran all across every mark in the boat, making it shine into a rise that helped it to actually float, arising into the air naturally like it was the sea, out of the cave, through the thick woods that had hidden the cave from others. No one was amazed as the royals, who stared as the sails were freed, helping with the speed, the movements, to fly the further off the ground as Khaos’s men tried to run off behind it in the ground, throwing arrows, but the Vikings threw at them stronger ones, and before they knew it, they were gone, little ants forgotten to the woods, and now they focused on the new hills, skies and routes. Feliciano held over to the side of the deck, seeing as the ground grew further and further away from them, providing such a wonderful and beautiful sight. His legs began to fly off, trying to come closer to it, and Ludwig had to quickly hold him down and move him apart from the edge. The men moved in busy strides, working quickly on what they needed, practically ignoring the two powerful beings that currently stood on their floors.

“Were any of you hurt?” Lukas gave them the attention needed, coming with healers ready to offer their services.

“We’re fine-”

“Actually, he was shot in the leg,” Feliciano wanted them to know.

“It’s surely fine, I don’t feel it any longer.”

“It’s still necessary we check, your highness, but if it’s not as bad, then it can wait, we need to hear Berwald’s orders."

“Berwald?”

The boat came into sudden stillness, with the heavy steps of a new figure coming from below the deck. All the men aligned themselves like the soldiers of their army, in respect to the new towering figure that came.

Feliciano thought that Ludwig had grown into a rather intimidating man, but this new man could very well be his competition. Blond hair, sea blue eyes covered in glasses, cutting and serious stare and features that made Feliciano tremble, holding to Ludwig’s arm, since all of a sudden he was rather accepting to all this closeness between them.

The boat was brought into silence, no sound from any other deck and the nature around them falling still like it was just for him. He looked among them to make sure they showed proper outlooks, even with their rough and messed clothing, faces, and hair. Ludwig and Feliciano noticed that he was the only one dressed in more appropriate wear; cut, clean, but yet not failing to show Viking, Scandinavian and also Swedish province symbols and culture.

He was done with his inspection, another more innocent like male joining his side, blond hair and violet eyes as the rest, sweet and even childlike. For a moment they forgot it was the person who had been insisting that they got on the boat earlier. Ludwig and Feliciano guessed he was like the second in command, both working together for the best of this crew. They finally stopped before them, bowing as they should and greeting with their ‘you highness’.

“Tha-than-thank-” Feliciano tried to word, taking a deep breath, looking into their kind eyes and replying in clear. “Thank you for saving us. If you wouldn’t have come, we don’t know what could have happened. Once we return to the castle, you shall all receive a well-deserved payment.”

“There is no need.” Berwald’s voice was as deep as he looked, yet with kindness still, enough for Feliciano to fall at ease with.

“Actually-” Mathias wanted to comment, but he was shut with a slap against his shoulder from Lukas.

“If someone should receive some kind of token is Emil,” Berwald pointed to him among the crowds, the boy not expecting this sudden recognition, blushing and rubbing his hands on his hair nervously. “For weeks we have been trying to find this specific hidden spot, managing maps and information of this base from spies and captures, but only Emil had the closest clue to where it could actually be located. Against our wishes, especially his older brother’s-” Berwald gazed over to Lukas “-he still went ahead and decided put himself at risk to prove his instinct was the correct. He spotted you both being captured and warned us immediately. We wouldn’t have believed him if it wasn’t for your St. Mark, whose magic helped us trace the cave better from your scents.”

Pookie finally perked up from the hidden spot he had taken in Feliciano’s jacket after their escape. Feliciano cuddled with him in thanks.

“We really appreciate all you’ve done, but we beg of you to take us to Copenhagen immediately. We have to catch the train that will take us to Amiens and continue on with the journey as intended,” Ludwig instantly wanted.

“Yeah, that’s not going to happen,” Mathias already said.

“What do you mean?” Feliciano asked.

“I’m sure Copenhagen is close, they couldn’t have taken us far," Ludwig tried to defend.

“You’re right, they didn’t, but Copenhagen or your expected route to Paris is actually extremely dangerous right now for you two,” Mathias started.

“Of course not! It’s a well-guarded route that many Kings and Queens before us have taken on the journey to Paris in peace.”

“And look how well that started out,” Emil pointed out sarcastically. Lukas gave him a glare to not be so rude.

“There has been more insisting than ever for your capture, that much we learned from our spies,” Berwald began.

“Why is that?” Feliciano asked, hoping they would have a better answer for perhaps the reason why they didn’t kill them when they were in their grasps.

“We don’t know, it’s heavy guarded information that only the tops know about, but something is off, something is different this time, and more than ever Khaos’s men will be active and ruthless on trying to destroy the Spheres of Validity before they get to the confinement field,” Lukas informed, since he himself worked personally with the spies.

“Since the route was publically said to all four of the kingdoms, as a better warning and for the places to become more prepared, the crown still made it the easier for King Khaos to plan his attacks. Now the cities you will be in and the routes you will take will surely be heavily swarmed by his men,” Berwald continued.

“I mentioned before already, they’re heavily guarded and we can protect ourselves well,” Ludwig wanted to say.

“It doesn’t look like it when low ranked ones actually managed to get into your train and get you captured. We had to come along and save you two or else you would still be tied down there and who knows what could have happened to the Validity Spheres,” the second in command commented.

“Since those low ranked ones failed, yet close enough as to capture you both, it gives the confidence to the higher ups to try and probably be successful,” Berwald finalized, making it clear to both the royals since they settled into worried silence. “We can’t take you directly to Paris, but we can offer to make you a new route there, one they don’t know about, avoiding target cities, which will make your passage easier. But you both must be tired and hungry, I

suggest you eat in our halls and rest for the night. Tomorrow morning we'll start the planning and hopefully get you to arrive to your next destination in two days."

Ludwig and Feliciano had to agree to Berwald's suggestion, nodding with approval since there really wasn't much they could do for now. Ludwig did have a map, and he was determined to join them in their planning, but indeed he was weak and famished right now, and one look to Feliciano and he could tell he was in the same state.

Berwald left along with the smaller man they later learned was named Tino, discussions of these plans already starting, men moving about the ship to help it continue steady on its wind road. Emil and Lukas decided on leading them to an assigned room they could share in the meantime, to place their things, get Ludwig's wound healed and change from their still wet and ruined clothes. They would then join the rest of the men in dinner.

Chapter End Notes

EDITED: 19.11.2024

Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

> I'm so sorry for taking so long, but university has hit me hard once again. Please be patient, I work on this when I can, don't expect updates as quickly. But do not worry, I will not cast Feli and the King of Hearts aside, it's too dear to me and of course I want to continue this journey.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Feliciano thought that their castle kitchen was a mess whenever there were events or important visitors came over, but it could never compare to this: Men gorging, toasting and feasting like they had just won a big war. Lukas later told him that it was actually a normal occurrence, one the sorcerer despised, enjoying from his meal with a blank and indifferent stare to everything around him. Ludwig and Feliciano didn't know how they could eat peacefully with their drunken splendor- and look…now they started to sing. They had no idea how they actually finished their plates with all these distractions. Ludwig rolled his eyes and needed some peaceful air from all of this, standing and making way to the top deck. Feliciano gazed behind him, waiting only a slight while, distracted suddenly by Mathias's own number of singing, a love song he could tell, which he constantly eased forward to Lukas, but the other would only glare with some command or scold to sit down and behave. Mathias never listened, and when he was about to begin another number, Feliciano decided to stand himself, for the freedom of the night air.

It was quite chilly, especially since they were floating above the air, but it was still a lovely sight, of beautiful hills, lakes, rivers and even small villages decorating the land from their above. Many stars glowed above them, dusted, colorful, seeming so close Feliciano raised a hand as if he could catch one. He stopped when he noticed Ludwig, arms over the side as he gazed to the sky, to the beauty around him, lost in thought surely. Feliciano hoped he hadn't interrupted with his closeness, but it was hard for Ludwig to ignore him, he could easily catch him from the corner of his eyes, pretending that watching some bridge that went over a large river was more important than his arising Queen.

"They're certainly festive," Feliciano commented, hoping once again for some conversation.

"Lunatics more like it," Ludwig had no problem with admitting.

"Those lunatics saved us," Feliciano wanted to remind.

"They're still deranged," he sighed and leaned his head into his hand, trying to keep his gaze on a distant star, not on Feliciano, he knew he would stare too much, blush and make a fool of himself. No matter how much he tried to erase him, he could still feel him shivering, noticing that the sewn long sleeve shirt they gave him was thin.

“They should have given you something thicker, come over here.” Ludwig turned to him, removing the embroidered cloak they had given him, not minding at all to put it over Feliciano, making sure it covered him well, letting his hands remain far too long, staring into the figure he wanted to hold so much.

Feliciano felt his hands on him so loving, letting a hand raise to touch his own, as if to share the warmness he just gave him. “Thank you, and…thank you also for protecting and watching over me, it was…really nice.” There he went smiling up to him and he couldn’t hold his pale cheeks from growing red. Stop it, stop it, stop it.

“You…you are my arising Queen, to wed or not, it is in my duty to protect you,” he wanted to excuse, but no matter, Feliciano could see past his wall to know, smiling, not letting go of his hold still on his hand.

“Why in the world did you guys deny the marriage?” A sudden voice asked, scaring the arising King and Queen to letting go of whatever gaze, whatever hold. They turned to meet with Emil, who was just coming up from the dining hall, just as annoyed by the ruckus down there.

Ludwig and Feliciano stood nervously, silent, not daring to look at each other, as if they had been caught doing something horrible. Emil still stood awaiting an answer but it didn’t come out from their mouths.

“You two clearly love each other. I saw how protective and worried you got and how you kept each other close.”

They blushed, but instead of creating union, it only helped to separate them more, to ignore the other.

“It-It’s nothing you should concern yourself about. I’ll…I’ll…make sure the scepter is still in the trunk,” Ludwig excused, heading down once again to head to their room, leaving Feliciano and Emil in the same questioning stand, his cloak still wrapped around his arising Queen.

“Were you guys having a moment? I’m sorry for ruining it,” Emil apologized.

“No, no, it’s all right, he always…gets like this, it’s nothing new,” Feliciano told him, hoping he wouldn’t feel so bad about it, and hoping he wouldn’t feel the sudden gloom he took, taking Ludwig’s earlier spot, gazing just as he was to the distances.

Emil joined him at his side, hoping it could work as some kind of comfort and also because he wanted to enjoy from this very delightful sight.

“So, Emil,” Feliciano turned to him with a smirk, hoping to converse with him. He needed to talk to someone, about anything really, he just didn’t want to feel lonely with such an empty deck. “Have you thought about what kind of prize you want?” He did want to show his appreciation somehow, and with the power of arising Queen, hopefully official Queen when he returned, he knew he could give it to him with ease.

“Oh…you were serious about it?”

“Of course I am. You saved our lives and helped to find a hidden base of Khaos’s men. You have to ask for something! I’m sure Ludwig and I can do what we can to give it to you.” He was sure.

Emil remained silent, gazing shyly to the ground for the longest while, but Feliciano still stood patiently, eyes only on him expecting an answer.

“Um…” he started, rubbing his wrists, surely an idea on his head, but he just didn’t know if he could word it, if he could admit it, in the place he was in even. “Do-do you know about the Luna Rani academy in Spades?”

“Of course, it’s the best school of magic in all the four kingdoms. Most of our power instructors were taught there,” he assured.

“Is it like…hard for Heartians to get accepted?”

“No, not really. Our kingdoms have agreements to let our people study there if they get accepted through the usual means.”

Emil fidgeted, pulling on his sleeves, biting his lips as to not blur out instantly what he wanted to say.

“Do you um…want to get into the Luna Rani Academy?” Feliciano guessed as much.

“I-I would love to! You have no idea how much, but…” he gazed about the boat, like in it was enough the chains that held him.

“You’re a joker?”

Emil sighed disappointedly, “that basically cuts my chances to anything in the kingdom.”

“Why don’t you denounce it? As part of the prize I can help you receive a Heartian registration reinstitution. As long as you were born in the lines of the Heart Kingdom, which I assume you did, with what your Icelandic tattoo and everything,” Feliciano remembered.

Emil didn’t answer, he remained in a rather melancholic silence, Feliciano trying to understand as much from it but it didn’t reach him.

“I won’t judge, you know you can tell me this,” Feliciano wanted to assure him, but Emil was still in thought.

It took breaths, a closing of his eyes, and the remembering of important memories with the heavy reminders. “Lukas and I owe a lot to this ship. If it wasn’t for it, I wouldn’t be talking to you right now,” he shivered, wrapping his arms around him as a comfort of the harsh beginning memories of his life. “Both our parents died when we were really young and Lukas had to try to do his best to take care of me by himself. In the process, he had a tendency of leaving me behind in Iceland so he could work and study in Norway, to then bring what he earned for me. After being denied a last test to earn his apprenticeship to a sorcerer because

of his social standing, he grew rather vengeful of the crown and blamed it harshly on the kingdom. Then we were actually attacked by Heartian soldiers, kidnapped, for the purpose on wanting some magic from Lukas, one that he refused to give them, and so they treated us like slaves until we decided to."

It brought Feliciano with great pity, wishing he could hug away those memories, fill him with all kinds of apologies from what those harsh men did. But Heartian soldiers doing those kinds of things? Nothing was written in their records and none had been active with such harsh commands. Not even Aldrich would have accepted something like that.

"We later found out that they were actual men of Khaos's disguised." It was a relief to Feliciano. He didn't think he could live with the guilt of his own army doing something like that. "But it did a lot to flare Lukas's anger with the kingdom, and when we were saved by Berwald and the rest, becoming a Joker offered a better chance than any of our provinces could offer. Sure, after finding out that the Heartian army had nothing to do with our capture, we could have relaxed, perhaps leave and Lukas could continue to try for that apprenticeship, but we ended up enjoying what we did here, that we could offer help, that Lukas could learn his magic better than any other school in Norway. It became our home, our people and I owe a lot to them…but…" he leaned more against the hold, a truth in his eyes that Feliciano knew would be a great relief for him to admit. "I don't want to continue living like this, I actually want to be a normal Heartian, study my own magic, live peacefully, normally without having to run off from the law or constantly moving trying to make such hard missions that could risk my own life every day. I want the calmness of any normal person and not the harsh insisting of a ship, but I don't want to live like I used to before we turned into Jokers. Sadly Lukas still sees me as a little kid and he won't take my wishes seriously. He thinks this is the best for me, but I'm honestly tired of it." Emil slammed his arms into the side walls, quickly trying to calm himself by rubbing his arms, hoping Feliciano understood enough, and he did, in his head concocting something that might actually help.

"Be right back!" He called, rushing over to his room.

From his things, he had one surviving sketchbook, wet, slightly ruined, but it was just enough. He tried to be as calm so Pookie could continue his rest on the bed, but no matter, he felt the arising Queen's presence bustling through the room and he just had to follow him back to the deck to see what he was planning on doing. Feliciano placed the sketchbook upon the rail where Emil had been waiting for him, taking the very first empty page. He hadn't actually started to use this one. Pookie flew around them both curiously and Emil tried to peek into what he could be writing.

"I'm making a reminder," he told him, since he knew he wouldn't be able to read since it was in Italian. "After we get the Validity Spheres from Diamonds, we'll head over to Spades to get theirs. I'll be staying at the capital where the Luna Rani Academy is in. I can make a recommendation that will make it much easier for them to accept you, but I need you write an essay about what you've gone through, what you want to do, write everything you know about magic and especially highlight what you did to save Ludwig and I. Do you think you can make it just before we have to leave the ship?" He stopped his excessive writing to look up to him, expecting a sure answer.

“I-I’ll try, but-”

“Listen, I don’t know when I’ll return to Berlin to be able to make your reinstitution, but it would be just enough time for you to speak to Lukas. Tell him all this you told me, make him understand and let him know that I’ll be doing what I can to make it possible. I’ll leave a note behind as proof and once you have your essay, I’ll save it here. I’ll see this notebook every day and remember it well across my entire journey, I won’t forget.”

Emil saw the heavy promise in his eyes and had no doubt that Feliciano would accomplish this. Emil nodded with confidence, trusting this chance, hands clenching and stretching ready for that essay he needed to write.

“But…Lukas would still want to keep being a Joker. What if I can’t see him or the rest again because-”

“I’ll make special permissions for them to move freely between Hearts and Spades for you, already wrote it down as well,” he pointed to it even though Emil couldn’t read the foreign language.

Emil had never felt this desire to hug someone so strongly, and the only thing holding him back was his respect to the arising King and Queen.

Ludwig and Feliciano had to share a very small bed. Sure, it would have been comfortable if they had been holding to each other close, cradled and cuddling, but in their relationship's state, the space they tried to keep between them only made it the more uncomfortable. At least Pookie made good use of it.

There was a sudden knock at the door, only opening slightly, for Emil to peek in and hope that he didn’t meet the two arising rulers in a compromising position. Oh good, they weren’t, he breathed out such a relief.

“Hey guys,” he called, noticing that they were stretching, settling their eyes to the room around them, sitting up, Pookie flying over them as if to help them in their waking.

“What is it, Emil?” Feliciano asked, just having finished, ready to even stand along with Ludwig as they got another set of clothing that the group had given them.

“First of all, it’s time to have breakfast, and second, once you’re done, Berwald expects you all to come to his quarters. We have to tell you guys about the new route.”

Their breakfast consisted of small open-faced sandwiches, cereal, and boiled eggs… something that was rare for Feliciano, but they ate them gladly along with their drinks and were led by Emil to the room where the leaders of the ship would be waiting for them. They took their steps in hesitantly, hoping they weren’t interfering with whatever they were planning. Their place of meeting was a large room with a bedroom to the side, a large desk in the center, countless of maps, charts, globes and compasses decorating the walls, the tables, even the floors. Ludwig and Feliciano were more impressed by those items than Tino,

Mathias, Lukas and Berwald hunching over the desk, where a large map of their area of Hearts and Diamonds was at its surface. They were so dedicated in their watching, in their line placing, that they only spared the future rulers a quick glance before they continued with their business. They only moved to offer a small space so they could see down below like the rest of them, already in their map doodling different kinds of routes. Any close to entering into the French province was clearly discarded and the one they seemed to be wishing the most was passage through the Algerian province. Ludwig clearly spotted it and had to interfere.

“We cannot take this route,” he already denied.

“It’s the safest one,” Mathias tried to defend.

“Safest? You’ll be putting us through the Sahara desert, with no village or city in sight for miles.”

“Exactly, less likely Khaos’s men will find you two and a terrain they wouldn’t dare follow into,” Tino added.

“But…but, how will we survive? We lost almost everything with the attack and we don’t have anything to bring with us,” Feliciano questioned, quite scared.

“We’ll offer all the missing supplies; food, water, protection spells and others that might help you get water if you run out,” Lukas added.

“We have Diamond allies in this territory. We’ll send them messages to let them know about your arrival, I’m sure they will help you through the dessert. You’ll have stops in three cities: Cairo, Jerusalem and Tehran, from there a train station is available that can take you to Besancon in the French province, they’ll surely grant you easier access to Paris from there,” Berwald told, pointing to all the lines, the cities marked and all the areas they would pass.

“You’re making us take a large detour. It’s an unnecessary turn around the French province,” Ludwig angered.

“Hey, at least you’ll be in Diamonds already. It’ll be easier to try and contact King Francis,” Mathias convinced.

“And better late than being captured again or even killed by Khaos’s men,” Berwald reminded.

Ludwig took a close look at the map, hoping he could prove them wrong, but it was as they said, all the closer ports and cities through the French province would be heavily targeted. Indeed the best option is going through the lesser known Arabic provinces, without giving them an even bigger detour through the damn Spades Kingdom. Nobody would expect them going through the Sahara desert and Ludwig though that if they tried to hurry as best as they could, then it wouldn’t leave them so behind. He sighed, thinking that they would have magic, these Vikings would give them supply, and although it meant dealing with other kind of Joker bandits, it was better than having to deal through this alone and targeted.

“Fine,” he ended up agreeing, to the delight of all in the cabin, even Feliciano who gave an excited clap.

“Then it’s settled.” Berwald picked up the map along with some charts, meaning to settle course to their next sure destination. “We’ll take you as far as the shores of the kingdom and the province. We have other missions and we cannot go any more ahead, but we’ll leave you with clear instructions,” Berwald commanded, heading out of the room with the rest behind him.

“Now I suggest you prepare. I will send the crew to get your supplies. You’ll be heading off in two days,” Tino added with just the command as Berwald, one that made him proud, a rare smile that Ludwig and Feliciano didn’t think he could even show.

“Anything else you want us to know?” Lukas asked.

Ludwig and Feliciano looked to each other, as if to remind if they were forgetting something. They shrugged since they really didn’t have anything else to say.

“Then there’s nothing to fear. I’m confident that our arising King and Queen will do well.”

Two days in the ship, flying over new terrains, fjords that Feliciano tried to sketch in his notebook, and a meeting of Killer whales right before they began their crossing of the Georgiatian Sea. From there on it was only large expanses of continuing water, all the same, nothing really new to Feliciano until they bypassed some distant island. His sketching went still, his focus on the waves and blue, quite tranquil no matter the insisting of the crew around him. It was in moments like these that he realized….this was a ship…it could sail on the sea like any other, yet it continued to fly on the wind instead, perhaps just for show or because the crew preferred it that way. Well it was still nice and he did like the breezy sea wind through his hair, surely more powerful than anything he would feel if they were below with the waves crashing against its haul.

If he wasn’t starring into the views of the wind, he would have conversations with the crew, with small little snacks, at dinner or with hot drinks whenever it got too cold. He especially spoke with Emil, who he got the chance to learn more from, be exposed to the kind of incredible magic he could do, Feliciano showing himself what he knew which always got impressed aw from the group. He showed what he could to Emil and he gladly learned and tested himself for the deck to see.

Ludwig had decided to busying himself with the crew, and although he knew nothing of sailing, they had no problem with giving him some teachings. He quickly adapted well to everything, doing the jobs he was given as easily and knowledgeable as if he was a member like any other. He was part of the rhythm that moved this ship, pulling and releasing ropes and sails as proud as his future sitting as future King. Feliciano enjoyed the way strands of his slicked back blond hair flew along with the harsh wind, clear blue eyes gazing expectantly to the horizon, hold on the ship with a strong grip that was the only thing maintaining him from seeming to fly with the air. He looked so gorgeous, handsome. There was something in the way he slightly smiled when he was trying new work, functioning well

in his first try, the expand of his body as he moved about, full of eager energy and force that Feliciano found himself blushing, licking his lips and even dimming his eyes, suddenly taken by his glowing, his want to be held in those strong arms. Their eyes met for a slight moment and Feliciano shook it away, distracting himself with another wave down below, his minds full of scolds for thinking such a way of a man that did not deserve this kind of admiration by himself.

By the next day, Feliciano's eyes had finally met land, mostly dunes which the waves of the shore crashed towards. The air was stinging, a falling of heat that not even the rushing wind between them did enough to cool. Feliciano was between riding every piece of clothing he had on to catch a good cool breeze or placing even more things to avoid the dust and strong rays of sun from scratching harshly at his skin. He saw the boat become more active, the crew readying for a soon arrival. Everyone was out, even Emil who helped with the roping and managing to get the boat docking in no define port against the shores.

Feliciano was so tempted to help, to pull or even hold something if it meant being part of it as the rest. Everyone refused it, apparently work too harsh for the gentile arising Queen. Some dared say that his presence was enough, that his smile was perseverance, with winks and seductive grins that Feliciano could only smile sweetly to and walk away from, noticing then the heavy glares Ludwig gave them when he saw.

The boat began its descend, Emil coming over to give Ludwig and Feliciano some mantles they could use to protect their heads from the harsh sand and heat. It was in that hold that he brought Feliciano his letter, in a pretty envelope with the same symbol he had tattooed on his shoulder.

"It's three pages long, hopefully just enough to accept me," he said.

"Oh they will, I'll make sure of that, Emil," Feliciano smiled surely.

They both shared in an appreciative hug and for once Emil didn't mind it. Feliciano's hold was as sweet as he was; soft, loving and even believing. They passed to each other the confidence they would respectively need for their own kinds of journeys.

Soon enough the ship came to a halt, landing upon the soft sand, some boulders serving well as balancing the haul from tilting to one side. If it received any scratches, they didn't mind, they could easily fix it with their kind of magic. Announcements were shouted in different Scandinavian languages across the deck, people moving about as they prepared for Ludwig and Feliciano's exit, as well as Berwald's instructions. A rope ladder was thrown overboard, giving the space for Ludwig and Feliciano to take slowly down. Feliciano waved farewells to all of them, hoping it would also be enough to show his thanks for all they did for them. They jumped suddenly to soft wet sand, shaking them slightly as they tried to adjust once again to the feeling of leveling ground. The five top leaders of the crew came down behind them, ushering them to move forward into the new terrain.

Further and further they moved away from the boat, testing the weight of the bags the arising King and Queen carried on their backs, Pookie taking rest in one of Feliciano's bag pockets and the single surviving trunk in Ludwig's hold. Feliciano was already tiring and they hadn't even really started yet. They continued until they went up the path of one of the strong sand

dunes, stopping suddenly before an old red and yellow brink, a little sign sticking out with some old Scandinavian and Arabic writing. Ludwig and Feliciano couldn't understand it at all. They both looked forward, to miles and miles of sand, sun, heat and nothingness. It was terrifying and it made Feliciano shake and whimper.

"All right, here's what you're going to do," Tino decided to explain, moving forward to where the brick started. He pointed exactly north, still to really make them both understand. It was in that moment that Lukas handed them a compass. "Keep going north and stay forward, no matter what stands in your way, no matter what you pass by or what you find. North, and don't you dare move from that direction or you will be immediately lost and we might as well send Death letters to the King and Queen."

It sounded grim and dreadful and it did not help with calming them down.

"There's a reason we provided you both with water and food to last for a week, to keep you focused on the path and not get distracted," Lukas said.

"I've heard horror stories of people that hallucinate lakes and go running off to try and reach them, never arriving, loosing themselves from the path, never returning…so stay hydrated," Emil tried to ease, but Feliciano thought he was going to cry soon.

"Our messages should have arrived by now and our allies should be making their journey to try and meet you both at some point. It will still probably take you a day of walking and a night of making camp before they reach you two. Once you're with them it's only a matter of hours until you arrive to Cairo," Berwald confided in them, giving them the space to move forward. Silence settled as they waited, as Ludwig and Feliciano understood, hesitantly moving forward, preparing their feet for the long walk this will surely be.

"It was fun to have you guys on the ship. Send messages from Cairo to let us know you arrived safely. I hope this isn't the last time we see each other," Mathias confided, with a wink and a salute, one to which Feliciano smiled in welcome.

"I'll invite you all to the first ball Berlin holds once we return," Feliciano promised, which actually earned expecting smiles from all of them, while Ludwig tried to hide a groan and a roll of his eyes.

"You better come back in one piece so it can happen," Emil added.

"We will," Feliciano promised, and with insisting from Ludwig they began their walk to the expanding horizon that seemed to taunt them. Occasionally they would look back, to the standing and watching figures of the five of them, waving in farewells and fortunes.

"Good luck, may the Aces be with you, your highness!" Were the last words Berwald's voice shouted, before he turned back with the rest and headed down the hill to get back to their ship.

Ludwig and Feliciano were now alone, in all this expanse of nothing but sand, devoid of human action and presence, seeming untouched.

As the minutes went by, they gazed back to see the ship taking flight once again to the sky, away from them, both giving it a wave just in case they saw them. They kept looking as some sort of consolation for the loneliness and danger they felt, continuing to traverse, the compass loyally in Ludwig's hand with the arrow pointing north as it should.

Sadly, in one turn back, the ship was gone, they were by themselves, trying to keep positive and energized thoughts to continue going.

Like Tino's suggestion. They kept their eyes straight, no distraction to the wasteland, to the looming death that seemed to surround them.

Chapter End Notes

EDITED: On 29.12.2024

I finally managed to continue editing. Here is the first announcement of my second pregnancy. Yes, excited, happy...but not glad about the constant nausea. You wont believe the shit that makes me feel terrible. Sadly, writing and reading is in that so I have had barely time to write. Hopefully once the first trimester passes through I can focus again and bring back regular updates.

Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

> I feel like it's been a century since I last updated this. I'm so sorry it's taken me so long to update, but not only has university been choking me, personal family matters have been just as harsh. Updates for this one will continue to be slow, but as always, be patient and I hope that you at least enjoy this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Everything, from the passage of their morning, to the afternoon, even to the night, remained exactly the same. Sand dunes, more sand, maybe an occasional rock, boulder or dried up tree. The only sound was that of the wind blowing through their ears, their voices not partaking in some friendly chatter that many times Feliciano tried to start between them. Ludwig always answered with silence, his gaze to the continuing front and to the compass in his hand, still north.

Apparently speaking to Feliciano was considered one of the distractions that Tino had warned about.

Feliciano had settled speaking only with Pookie, who answered with cute little roars or a cuddling to either his shoulder or cheek. Ludwig tried to make their stops quick, only to replenish their bodies on water, food, refresh with cooling spells and then be insisting on Feliciano to move. So many times Ludwig had to stop because Feliciano was looming too far behind, tempted to just carry him the rest of the way, but Feliciano always managed to reach, to continue, trying to stand strong against the fatigue that would arise so he could prove himself to Ludwig. He didn't need his scolds or his commands, especially with this heavy heat that only made everything more stressful.

When night had reached, the tiredness in them was one of needed sleep, and finally they could stop to make that rest. Ludwig was in charge of putting up a tent the Vikings had given them while Feliciano heated and prepared the food they were given. Not his ideal, but he shouldn't complain when he was in the middle of a dessert and he didn't have his cabinet of sauces and spices. They huddled together inside the tent, quite cool now, their focus on only the food Feliciano had served in their bowls. As soon as it was done, Feliciano settled outside with Ludwig, sitting, staring into the expanse of stars above them. Feliciano sketched it in his notebook, trying to remain in one page since it was the only book he had, needing to make it last the whole trip.

Despite being a dessert, there was a sudden beauty to it that deserved three more pages of art.

"Feliciano, go to sleep," Ludwig insisted, not scolding, not mad, actually with concern, yet he didn't stand, his stare still on the horizon, remaining strong in his watchful sitting.

“If I’m going to, you should as well,” Feliciano said back, not stopping at all his sketching, now wishing he could add some color.

“Someone has to keep watch.”

“For what? There’s nothing. The only ones who know about us here are the jokers who will pick us up. You’ll be losing sleep for nothing.” Feliciano could get just as scolding and Ludwig was rather startled from it, trying hard to hide a grin.

“You never know what kind of bandits are out there. Don’t you remember the tales of Fawzi?”

As if those silly childish stories could be proof enough. Feliciano couldn’t believe this was coming out from Ludwig’s mouth.

“Of course, it was my father who read them to us.”

Vincenzo had an old book lying about the house from his own old family heritage of these very provinces which made him a Romani in other Kingdoms.

“Do you think Fawzi would appear with his sword of golden triumph to save us if the bandits of Brazia appeared to take our Spheres of Validity?” Feliciano wondered childishly, easing in like a secret between them as they used to do.

Ludwig actually found himself chuckling. “He’s the main hero of the Sahara Dessert, of course he will."

“But what about his weakness! The iron hatchet, wielded by the evil Tarik!”

“Little does anybody know Tarik himself also has a weakness,” Ludwig admitted proudly, which got shock from Feliciano.

“He does?”

“I found something in the castle long ago.” Ludwig ushered for him to come closer, to tell him in whispers even if they were the only ones there. “Fire from a Queen.”

Feliciano glowed. “Nothing to fear! I will protect us both then!” He proclaimed, standing with a proud and obnoxious pose, gaze to the air, foot on a rock and hands on his hips. “Brazia would think twice before messing with us!”

“You blew up the fire place the last time you tried to light up something.”

“My power is just the danger our enemies need to run.”

“I hope you know where to aim.”

“I will! I will be worthy!”

“Sit down! You’re being embarrassing!”

Feliciano laughed, wildly, alive and vibrant, another star from the many ones that hanged. Moments like these made Ludwig realize how beautiful Feliciano truly was, how much he still adored his smile, hoping he could say more to keep him this brimming. He let a small grin show, which had Feliciano hypnotized, silence between as they used it to admire.

No, Ludwig knew he couldn't, he instantly shut it, turned away, soured his face well into his grown male features.

"Please…go to sleep," he insisted once again, turned away, suddenly maddened.

Feliciano's mood instantly shut down along with his change, disappointed that they couldn't continue in this game, in these laughs, in enjoyment for the night.

Feliciano sighed disappointedly into his command, beginning his stand. "Only if you join me as well. I won't let you miss your sleep." Feliciano was not going to move until then, no matter how long Ludwig still sat on.

He thought that Feliciano would give up on this, head inside and forget, but to his surprise he didn't, heavy eyes on him to let him know that yes he was still there and still waiting. Ludwig sighed and had to deny to this watching, standing, opening the flap to their tent and granting access to Feliciano first. Feliciano smiled gladly, proud that his own insisting worked, coming inside after being quickly followed by Ludwig.

Pookie rolled his eyes after witnessing this.

Ludwig and Feliciano slept in their own side of the tent, the center for Pookie to rest and where they lay their things. From the cool air of the night, to the intense heat of the coming morning, one that only caused them to turn and fret in whatever was left of their sleep. They should probably wake up, continue on the route, but tiredness was heavy on them and sleeping a little bit longer seemed like it wouldn't do them much harm.

Pookie, having better sense than the two, suddenly awoke when he felt a distinct rumbling from afar. He looked around hoping he could better identify what it could be, but it was strange. He flew over to Feliciano hoping to wake him up, but the brunet shooed him away, hoping for more minutes of sleep. Pookie thought about biting him for a moment, but that was when the rumbling became clearer, the sounds potent, a coming presence that Ludwig and Feliciano, not even in their sleep, could ignore. They stood in fear, quickly dressing in what they could from what the Vikings gave them.

It came closer and closer, until Ludwig and Feliciano could identify shouts, human presence, a large force like that of an army. Feliciano was trembling in fear, gulping, wishing he had more guts to go out there and see what this could be; luckily he had Ludwig for that.

The vibrating stopped, shouts between whoever was out there being called in some Diamond dialect that they couldn't understand. Feliciano was about ready to shout, but Ludwig quickly covered his mouth, holding him tight to him, an arm wrapped around his waist to keep him from moving, from causing more presence that would get these strangers to know. They

remained like this, trying to guess what was happening outside with mere sounds, guessing bandits, soldiers, maybe even dark magicians or some branch of Khaos's men. Silence reigned for so long that Feliciano wanted to hope that they had left without disturbance.

"Your highness!" One shouted, in a familiar tongue to them.

Yes, the person addressed to them respectively, but her tone was harsh, commanding, fearsome, and it only scared Feliciano the more.

"Stay here until I think it's safe," Ludwig warned him with a piercing glare, his hands tight on his arms hoping Feliciano would understand enough to stay put. He nodded and obeyed, and Ludwig, trusting that Feliciano would remain obedient to it, slowly began to head out of the tent.

The sun's harshness welcomed him with a smack, so strong that Ludwig squinted, hand above his eyes to try and notice the figures that were present, powerful and even mystical as they stood above the sand, with covered and readied gear that made them impenetrable to whatever this dessert could challenge them with. Their heads and faces were covered with masks, goggles and mantels, all a singular color to match well with the colors of the dust and wind, some golden intricate designs at the edge to remind them of their original culture, their original province and kingdom, despite who they were, seen in the symbol they all had sewn into the front of their shirts.

They were Jokers.

Ludwig finally noticed behind them three other ship-like structures, the cause of surely all the rumbling they had heard earlier, unlike any he had seen. Large wood panels that extended flat, ending with two canoe-like boats underneath for them to sail the sand quicker and easily, decorated walls on top to serve as rooms for navigation, for resting, for eating, windows framing from which others stared to the Heartian arising King in their own sitting. Geometrical designs spread around every opening, with calligraphy of their language, ceilings that extended magnificently to keep shade to those who wanted to remain outside the walls, their legs falling down playfully, distances safe from having sand attack them, but a height that they could easily be killed from if they fell off in movement. All these people stared and only stood towards Ludwig's direction, nothing but the rushing of the wind between them, creating the division that they knew they had to come across.

Ludwig took that passage, coming closer to them, and so one of their own approached, until they were before each other, unarmed and meeting in silence. As a show of trust, of reaching and of welcoming, the figure that seemed to be the leader removed her head gear, long waved dark brown hair flowing across her back, large brown eyes, dark skin with occasional golden dots, seeming granted by the magic of the sun. She looked exceptionally young, making Ludwig wonder if she was perhaps a mere teenager. Not the kind of person he expected as the leader of a distinct group of Jokers.

"Dua Hakim," she introduced, with a bow, one to which Ludwig bowed just as respectively to.

"I assume you are the help contacted by Berwald."

“We are indeed, and we are all sure that you are the arising King of Hearts, although I fail to see his highness the arising Queen of Hearts.” She gazed around the area, only spotting the tent and their burned firewood.

“Feliciano!” Ludwig simply called.

After a moment, Feliciano hesitantly headed out, shaking, still intimidated by their amounts, their strange wears and boat contraptions. He felt rather awkward as he tried to put on the scarf, jacket and vest the Vikings had given him, messily and clearly showing his nervousness at the situation.

“We do not want to harm either of you, we are here to offer our services and protection to the arising rulers of Hearts. Please, pick your things and come with us, we’ll take you across the province until we reach Tehran. Our next stop will be Cairo, where you will be able to send messengers to contact on what happened to both your kingdom and his majesty, King Francis.”

Yet another joker Feliciano found himself easily falling into trust. After giving them more gazes, Feliciano could sense no malice from them, instead a welcoming aura that instantly he wanted to run to.

Two men came and helped them with taking down their tent and bringing their things inside one of the boats. Most of them easily jumped onboard, something that Ludwig and Feliciano didn’t think they could do and so they were given ladders to climb. Once all made sure that they were safe in their hold, they began their drive once again. Feliciano didn’t hold himself from having a chance to see how exactly these boats worked, so he ran over to one of the gazing balconies, where he noticed a man posted at each corner of the square, controlling with magic the sand around, seeming to transform them into waves that helped the boats move on as freely as it was in the sea. A beauty, the calm of the crew like they were in any of their homes, it was all something never before seen to Feliciano and he quickly went to get his sketchbook to draw. Two pages he gave: To how these men sailed the dunes and to the art they gave to their walls and floor, having Feliciano in full wonderment for the rest of the trip. Ludwig remained inside, a rather dark corner away from the heat and the sand that now flied over the structure more wildly. He expected calm, but he was sharing that very room with three other covered figures who only stared on to him, unblinking and unmoving, making Ludwig regret his stay there for the moment. He gazed to Feliciano practically hanging from the balcony, a groan escaping. He should probably stand up and get him to sit still and behave, anything to distract himself from the heavy stares all these men or probably women gave him.

As the Vikings had told them, their arrival to Cairo was hours distance, just in time for the sun to begin its descend into a golden sunset in the horizon. Towers stood high before the sun, homes and buildings coming more into their vicinity, populating the dessert once again in presence, in liveliness, in sound. The boat hadn’t even stopped yet but Feliciano was eager to see, to walk these new streets, new buildings, markets, in designs never before seen to him, relying mostly on pattern and floral designs, simplistic, but extending beautifully and uniquely. Ludwig had to come up and hold Feliciano down before he would actually fall off,

especially after he saw a gathering to witness some sort of jewel lightning in one of the structures.

The boat moved on ahead past whatever distraction, through richness, through important landmarks. The pyramids stood far in the distance, a golden marble shinning enough to see well even in their many miles apart. They were just like in the stories, encyclopedias or even reports their grandfathers read them. Rare, enchanting, a powerful presence of Aces as if the Diamond Ace was standing right above them, watching to the arising King and Queens of his sister Ace's kingdom. It was a view Ludwig and Feliciano kept their stares on, beautiful, majestic, a reminder of power that made them want to bow down to. It was still in their vision even when they stopped, when the crew members began to shout and began their descend, jumping down as easily as they came up, but once again Ludwig and Feliciano had to use ladders placed for them. They stopped before a building that stood apart from the main of the city, a single bricked road before them that connected it back to its center. There was presence of the dessert around them, for the building seemed close to being engulfed by a tall sand dune. Still it was busy, alight, topped with even a tower with lighting gems that reminded everyone in the city and those who were passing by that it was used, that people lived there, but for what, both Ludwig and Feliciano wanted to find out.

They stood before it, simply staring for the longest time, quite awkwardly to all the rest of the inhabitants.

"Um…your highness?" Dua came close, awakening, reminding. "Are you both all right? I'm sorry our water and food wasn't well enough and not what you're used to, but if anything you can eat something here that would be better."

"Oh no, it's not that! Your food was fine-"

"We were just wondering what this building could be," Ludwig made the question, still gazing on, hoping that he could define it himself before Dua explained.

"You could say it's our base, but it also works as a messaging station, probably the quickest working one in all of the Diamond Kingdom. The owner is secretly a Joker," she admitted with quite the ease.

"He is?" Feliciano wondered. It was pretty hard for a Joker to get a prestige title, if even a small one as that. Well, both Ludwig and him just witnessed an entire gang of them move freely through the dessert and even the city without a gaze of questioning from the citizens. Perhaps they had different custums for Jokers here in Diamond.

"Everyone here thinks our symbols are just ones of the company, we just have a way of explaining things to not attract much attention and it surprisingly works," she smirked and winked, clearly proud about it. "Now come on in, there's dinner waiting and you guys need to start working on your letters."

They were given a room, a pretty high one that gave a splendorous view of the city, the pyramids still at its distance. Feliciano couldn't find it in him to rest yet, his sketchbook

opened trying to capture this. If he grew distracted, he counted the lights, the ones of both the ground and sky, letting a hand fall to caress Pookie on his lap, resting already for the night. Ludwig wrote the letters by himself as he insisted to Feliciano, detailing well what had happened, their location, who they met and their current plan to make it through the Arabic provinces. He requested guidance and protection from Besancon to Paris as soon as they arrived, although he made clear that he didn't know an exact date, to just be alert. In the one to his grandparents, he made sure to write they were okay despite the circumstances and that the staff with the Spheres of Validity was unharmed and in their hold, although they did lose the rest of their trunks.

"Am I really going to start scolding you every night about going to sleep," Ludwig said just as he gave each letter his signature.

"Just a couple of more minutes, this looks absolutely stunning!" Feliciano couldn't depart from his window and not even Ludwig's words were enough of a pull away from it.

Ludwig sealed both the letters, directions written on them. He also wrote a small little note meant to be sent to Berwald and his crew, letting them know they found their help and were well in their hold and protection.

They were ready to be given into the messaging system.

"Well, if you're going to stay up, you could at least accompany me to hand in these messages, I still don't know who were supposed to give them to,"

"Didn't Dua give us a number when we were having dinner?" Feliciano stood, quite curious and eager.

"I was just thinking about it, so let's head out and see right now."

Each picked from a robe they were given and headed up the halls of the building, much of it deserted since many were already in their sleep or settling down into it. Ludwig and Feliciano were fearful that the messenger they were supposed to give this to was already off and gone, leaving them to wait several more days and only growing the anxiety their families and even Francis felt at home for not knowing anything. They climbed and climbed until they reached the very heights of the building, the yellow, the golden colors, the refinery growing much more, to shinning tiles with surely jewels and expensive crystals mended in the design. The number was above the largest door in the building, doubled, imperial to surely signify the power this person held in this domain. Feliciano stood behind Ludwig for protection and Ludwig took the decisive knock. They received a gentle voice, quiet and almost inaudible, Ludwig and Feliciano thinking that perhaps it was just the wind or muttering from the floors below. They heard as the doors were unlocked and so they took their passage, into a circled spacious room, full of letters and maps quite orderly placed in their spots. A rather small and young man was working with one of those many piles, gazing to the directions, the names, the places, once decided, sending some to other piles or throwing them over some distinctive tubes that were spread across the room, sucking them elsewhere. He looked up, not expecting these kinds of visitors. He finished his work with one letter, straightening the robes he wore along with some golden bracelets on his wrist.

“Your highness,” he bowed to them, “Gupta Muhammad Hassan, leader of this base, I was the one Berwald contacted to be able to address your welcome. Has everything been going well? Let me know if there’s anything you need me to work on.”

“Your people have done excellently. The city is beautiful and we wish we could thank you more,” Feliciano quickly complimented, which earned a smile from the small man.

“But we do ask that you send these letters immediately, with destination to the castle in Berlin and another to the one in Paris.” Ludwig handed them in, Gupta knowing instantly what he was supposed to do with them. With a slide of his hand, a special golden symbol appeared on top, official of the Diamond Kingdom, as well as a small one with his secret official tittle, and that was the symbol of their gang of Jokers.

“Royal mail like this usually takes about three days, but I’ll try to make it in two, I know the urgency.” With them both he moved forward to let it be sucked in by one of the tubes again, the duty settled to Ludwig. He was about to pull Feliciano to leave for the night, but his arising Queen had gone to inspect one of those many tubes, gazing down to them, wondering where exactly it was that these letters were taken.

“What are these?” His curiosity couldn’t help but ask, noticing then some buttons at the edge of the tubes, tempting for him to press.

“No, no, no, please your highness, don’t press that!” He stopped him before an accident could occur; Feliciano’s face was too close to it. “Extremely delicate and dangerous, any wrong doing could destroy it and it’s quiet hard for us to get funding to be able to fix them,” Gupta explained.

“No funding?” Feliciano continued to question.

“We do get some, but it’s not enough. The Diamond crown is rather reluctant to help other provinces other than France. Any of my pleads could take months to answer, and usually with negatives and refusals. Everything we hold we must make it last and fix what we can by ourselves. These tubes are rather rare, they spread well across the province, using magic to deliver letters by city to city. As we’re speaking, your letters have probably already arrived to Sanaa, where messengers are already preparing them on their journeys to bring them to their respective place.” Gupta was rather proud about it, pointing easily to the contraptions that only made them shine the more in Feliciano’s eyes.

“Why would the kingdom not give them funding? If I knew one of my provinces held something like this, I would make it available in the entire kingdom!” Feliciano made sure.

“Well sadly your ruling does not cover our domain, but thank you, I take your words to heart.” He smiled and Feliciano shared one with him. “Was your visit only for the letters?”

“Yes, we should we be leaving. Thank you once again for all your services,” Ludwig interrupted before Feliciano went on blabbering something that would leave them there for the rest of the night.

“Very well then. You’re scheduled to leave early in the morning to Jerusalem, so I suggest you take your rest, the journey that awaits you through the dessert is still a long one.”

They obeyed and bowed in approval, despite how much Feliciano wanted to stay, pouting, giving last missing gazes to all the letters and contraptions around him, wishing he had another day to really take a look at everything. He could make sketches, talk to Gupta, bring this to the Hearts Kingdom, to the castle in Paris, to be used, to be known.

The jokers were kind enough to give them a whole new trunk of things they could use. They were filled with new clothes, of yellows that were rather odd for them to wear, but for their stay in Diamond, it was only appropriate. At least they were varied in different styles of the Diamond provinces. The same crew offered to take their things and place them once again upon the sand boats they had gotten to know the day before. All three boats were joining along, for protection, for supplies, or simply eager for the adventure of this route to Tehran. Both Ludwig and Feliciano had been fed breakfast, dressed in their protective gear from both the sun and heat, beautifully, styled, standing proudly as arising rulers between jokers. They awaited outside the building as the crew prepared the ships, both looking for a hint of Dua since she was the only one they really knew, but all the people there were covered, making it hard for them to tell. It was beginning to feel awkward standing there while others worked on for them, they started to think it was unfair and were about to suggest a way they could help.

“Lovely day, isn’t it?” A familiar voice joined them, looking proudly to the intense heat, dessert continuing onward, the city in the proximity. Sure, it had its own unique sense of beauty, but to Ludwig and Feliciano, it wasn’t the ideal, so the comment came out as odd.

“Um…” Feliciano tried to find an answer, turning to the figure and recognizing it as Gupta’s, prepared with wear similar to the rest of the Jokers, a bag in his hold.

“Are you going somewhere?” Feliciano asked curiously.

“I’m joining along,” he proclaimed.

“You’re coming with us?” Feliciano seemed too excited for a person he had only met briefly the night before.

“I need to make sure you are both rightfully taken care of. Your powerful rulers of another kingdom, with a lot on your shoulders to get these Validity Spheres and place them on the field. If anything happens, I rather it happen before my eyes so I can better deal with it.”

“Gupta, you doubt us too much.” There was Dua’s familiar voice, joining alongside them.

“It is not doubt, just extra precautions,” Gupta wanted to make her understand, but she still rolled her eyes, beginning to move forward to the boats, her own departure ready.

The rest knew it was time for them to board as well. Ladders were presented to them, and Gupta took them with finest, a prideful walk that made some groan, others chuckle. Gupta didn’t seem to mind it, he actually gave a small smile, ushering Ludwig and Feliciano to join

him in his area of sitting, both taking a comfortable couch for the rest of the journey. The ladders were up, no one else came out calling for a joining, the sand rowers began to use their magic to bring movements to all the ships once again and they were off into the horizons.

As the last trip, it was slow, silent, with the same stares, no sound but of the ships hitting against the sand and occasional rocks they found. Gupta kept his full attention on a scroll he had brought, Ludwig deciding on reading the book his grandfather had given him, for now settling on self exercises to keep his magic well flooded within himself. Feliciano…was bored out of his mind. Drawing was not enough, he needed laughs, he needed movements, conversations, not this silence while being surrounded by people in such a close space.

There was a particular man sitting upon a wall, gazing out the window, hands tracing the design surrounding it rather dearly. He seemed just as bored as Feliciano, and so the arising Queen chose him as a target, standing, coming close, Pookie comfortably on his shoulder not minding at all his decision to befriend. Ludwig glared and kept a heavy eye on him, making sure that he wouldn't do anything embarrassing or even insulting to these people.

"Ciao, could you perhaps help me with something?" Feliciano asked him, catching his immediate attention, although rather surprised that the arising Queen of Hearts would approach him. He was a simpleton, a joker even.

Feliciano took a sitting beside him, showing the sketch he had recently made of the interiors of the boat, trying to copy it to perfection.

"Did I do this well?" He pointed to the very designs around the different windows, hoping it was enough to compare to the wonder that was originally on the boat.

The man moved aside his goggles, his mantles for Feliciano to meet with golden brown eyes, tousled blackened hair, dark enchanting features that made him shine the more beautifully. Feliciano clearly blushed and Ludwig tried hard not to rip apart the book in his hand from the tight hold he had suddenly begun to give it.

"It's wonderful, but-" He moved closer, taking one side of the sketchbook, letting Feliciano maintain the other one. "I would suggest you give more curves here and add a little bit more detail to this top," he pointed and Feliciano quickly made the changes, together working and giving each other the company they needed to make the beginning of this new trip interesting.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

> Once again, I apologize for delay, I actually had this chapter ready for the last three days, but I couldn't even find time to post. Things have been really stressful. As always, patience and I hope you enjoy this chapter.

His name was Haris, just Ludwig and Feliciano's age, from the Israeli province, having joined this Joker group after losing his entire family in a raid by once again Khaos's men. That time it had been because they were begging for a define version of a tale that was well known throughout these parts of the Diamond Kingdom. Haris told them that his ancestors had been contacted by the Diamond Ace himself with a tale that they passed down with exactness throughout the generations. King Khaos's men wanted it desperately and so it had caused Haris's loosing of them when they refused to word it to men they knew could use it for danger. This particular group of Jokers had found him and had taken him into his care after he had nothing else to look forward to.

"Do you know the tale?" Feliciano asked him curiously, leaning with a sweet begging in his eyes to know.

Haris smiled and leaned just as close, watching around himself as to not let others hear, not even Ludwig, who moved ever so closer to them the more Haris and Feliciano got nearer.

"I'm the last lone word of the tale." He was proud, with a smug and even a glowing in his eyes that Feliciano found alluring, much to Ludwig's eye roll.

Feliciano took a great gasp, filling himself with enough reaction to show exactly the interest he had of this. "Can I know it? Can I know it?" He asked and begged like a child, crawling the ever closer to him, Ludwig near to scolding and moving him back. Haris chuckled, not seeming to mind of course, he had the attention of the arising Queen of Hearts all for himself. The teasing smirk he had on made Ludwig feel like he was mocking him.

"Jerusalem actually has a mural dedicated to the story, I can explain it to you well once were there," he promised, and it only made Feliciano the more anxious to get there.

After the opening Feliciano had made with Haris, others began to break their own shells, joining along in a circle of conversations, of laughs and cultural exchanges that even Ludwig was enjoying from.

Their arrival to Jerusalem was not as quick as it had been to Cairo. They spent an entire day and an entire night traveling, not giving themselves time to stop and stall. Luckily they were

equipped with enough food and water to enjoy inside, the magicians taking turns so each could take their rest and their own helping to the food that was brought and presented.

They arrived to Jerusalem an early morning, the heat as intense as any other in the extend of the dessert. It was here that they decided on their stop, for movement to be given to their legs, re-supply, settle and rest well without the shaking and dizziness of the boats. Dua and Haris decided to act as tour guides around the city to Feliciano, later Ludwig after he realized Feliciano would have a lot of alone time with Haris if he didn't. They both had visited enough to understand well the streets they walked in, the restaurants they ate, the sights, the few amount of art, but more importantly, the building that shone rather peculiarly on its own, the temple mount. It was to them the place that they thought the Diamond Ace first created the kingdom, its people, its creatures, its set of order and life. Entrance to the church inside was forbidden unless you were either a trained priest, the King, Queen, or Jack of the Diamond Kingdom. Still, there was a surrounding wall they could visit, decorated, acknowledged with prayers and love as a form of gratitude to their Ace. Dua and Harris didn't pay much attention to all of it, they passed by crowds and helped Ludwig and Feliciano to push aside as they made their way to the true interest. Much to Feliciano's surprise, it was actually a pretty deserted area, with enough space for him to move forward and gaze at its tallness that reigned with color, design, and story, unique in the entire wall and even city.

The four Aces were presented at its top, and below, a story seemed to be told, with only two figures, surrounded only by the items that tried to explain it. Feliciano couldn't understand, but Haris gladly began to tell to light up its meaning.

"Long ago, our Ace of Diamonds had one day decided to take a peek through the doors that granted watching into our world. In this particular seeing, he saw the unfolding of a persecution, of a family being chased down, a young baby girl in their hold that they desperately tried to protect. The persecutors managed their holding, their attack, even the killing, but there was still the young baby girl. Although it was unbecoming for Aces to offer much help in the events of the human world unless it was those of their Kings, Queens and Jacks, he intervened and stopped any harm from coming to the girl. He learned her name was Zubaida, and he made sure she was taken to a family that took care of her, raised in a simple house hold where she lived with another adoptive sibling. Her sibling was jealous, cruel, and brought misery to the young girl every day ever since her arrival. She managed well to get her into trouble in the household, causing Zubaida to earn scolds and harsh punishments for them. It was a new temptation every day to run away, prayers to the Aces for escape, for relief, and the Diamond Ace answered by visiting, using the form of a vessel that could survive and be seen to the humans. He dressed himself as a blind beggar, testing Zubaida's kindness, humility and even friendliness. She would always offer him help, give him food, talk on about topics that interested them both.

Each day the Ace would give her words of wisdoms, things to help her continue on, believe in a better future that he worked to give her by these chats and words. She looked forward to them each time, their friendship growing like that of a grandfather and his granddaughter, their walks through the village known to all, which caused stories for people to tell.

Years passed, Zubaida grew, a woman to which the kingdom could use to their advantage. War was alive, rampaging throughout the kingdom, and Zubaida offered her services for the defense of her province and kingdom. She settled off and left the small town she had grown up in, but not before promising to the old beggar the gift of lighting stones from whatever adventure this new path decided to take her on. She collected them from each of the provinces, even the kingdoms she visited, keeping it all in a chest, in it papers where she had written his sayings, the spells he taught her, all tied to a different stone that reminded her of them.

Years later, she returned to her village recognized as a great war hero, welcomed in celebration and honors that she would have never expected from them. Eager she was to meet with the old beggar, but then she learned that he had died shortly after leaving. She was devastated, the chest of stones and words a gift that she was never to give, a weeping that continued on for many days.

She then received the visit of another man, of her age, of beauty, of gentleness, presenting himself as a grandson of the beggar, seeking for the chest, for her own friendship, her love, later her hand, which she gladly took, their son then chosen to become the next King of the kingdom."

As Haris told, he pointed to the symbols, the connections, making both Ludwig and Feliciano understand more the live story the mural was telling.

"But…wait." Feliciano kept thinking, a question arising with those last words, Ludwig with the same wondering. "If the Ace of Diamonds was the beggar, he couldn't have possibly died, and he couldn't have had family for this sudden grandson to appear."

Both Haris and Dua chuckled, knowing well, always delighted to reveal this particular part of the story.

"To this day, many actually believe that the handsome figure was just the Ace of Diamonds in another disguise, and thus the line of Bonnefoy use that excuse as to prove that their lineage is that of Aces and demi-gods," Dua informed.

"But in actuality, it's wrong." Haris knew, and he confided well in the truth his family was told generations ago. "The Ace quickly returned to his realm after he had exceeded his allowed time with the humans. In his court, he told stories of Zubaida, of her progress in the journey, her gaining of the stones and any of the heroic acts she made. An angel by the name of Hosni, who was actually in charge of placing decorative stones around the celestial castle, was enamored with her stories, always faithful to listening to them whenever the Ace began his telling. They say he fell in love with her by simply hearing them, every night reaching the doors of passage, tempted to take peeks of her, fall down and join in her adventure. After Zubaida's return to the village, the Ace seeing the great amount of loyalty Hosni held for her, granted him access to the human world, in return that he offered protection, love, and trust, just like he had done as a beggar, to her. He had done so well, even in helping to create a temple in honor of the Diamond Ace, using the very stones she had gotten on her journeys."

Feliciano kept enamoring himself which each word of the story, eyes only on the mural as it seemed to come alive in his mind, those figures moving as if they were building that very

temple around him.

“And where is this temple?” He wondered.

Haris sigh disappointedly, fault and anguish, close to tearing and gripping for a chance. “Not even my family knew where it was.” A tragedy that could be heard in the loss of life in his tone.

“Many speculate that it was destroyed during the war of the blackened decades,” Dua continued, sensing her friend’s dread. “Once it had a define location, but now a days there’s nothing but rubble there, no design, no building, not even a stone, Haris and I have gone ourselves.” They both pouted, the memory a reminder of misfortune.

“Are there any scrolls at least? Records? Anything?” Feliciano begged, hoping there was some sort of chance.

“Absolutely nothing. All traces of it completely disappeared, because of it. Some say that it never even existed.”

“But why? Why would it get destroyed? Why would somebody take down something so historic and important?” Feliciano found no meaning.

“Many says it was perhaps a design Hosni and Zubaida had made, something that angered, something that had to be hidden…” Silence settled as they tried to figure what it could be, as if a hint could be read in this mural instead.

“It was something that surely Khaos’s men would have loved to know themselves, and they thought that with my family they could.” Piercing pain was in Haris’s eyes, surely in his mind the flashes of that day passing before him, weakening him, even a slight shake that he tried to control with the griping of his fists.

Feliciano came close hoping he could give some sort of ailment, but a grab of his shoulder by Ludwig told him that it was best that he didn’t. He wasn’t sure how exactly he could react to it.

“At least the story is still alive, at least people know about Zubaida, she’s praised along with Hosni as surely the Ace of Diamonds wants. King Khaos could destroy her temple, but he cannot destroy her legacy,” Feliciano said hoping it could give him the relief, the breath that his body needed once again.

It worked well enough to stop his trembling, to let his figure compose straight, his eyes returning that gleam of hope, of expectation and wonder to fight on if even by himself. Like Zubaida’s legacy continued, it was in his to continue the story as his family had done well to do.

“And I hope nothing will halt it,” he declared, with the breath that finally returned him back to normal.

The rest were relieved.

“I think it’s time for lunch. How about we take you to have some falafel, I know of a place that makes the most excellent one in the city.”

Feliciano practically shouted with joy and eagerly moved them all forward, leaving the mural behind, but not out of their minds.

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After that lunch, Gupta had found them and they headed back to their boats, once again off on the journey, content enough to know that their next stop at Tehran would be their last one.

Throughout most of the day their treading continued, but late in the night they had to make a stop. All the magicians were indeed too tired from their rowing and wanted some time to relax. They circled all the boats around an array of large boulders that they could take as a form of shelter, they prepared a fire from which they all centered around, where they cooked their food and shared it along with drinks and chatter. Of course, Ludwig and Feliciano joined, Feliciano enjoying from this air of feast and liveliness, while Ludwig frowned as he always did, not understanding how this was rest when they were simply fooling and wasting sleep time.

Some of the men and women took out instruments, drums, guitars, and flutes of their own, rare and weird for Ludwig and Feliciano, but still shinning beautiful and uniquely. They started playing, some humming along trying to mimic the very instruments, in union creating a melody that seemed to bring color to the nothingness of the dessert. Feliciano clapped along with some of the others, impressed then as some began to stand and join in dances around the fire. It was mostly those with the perfect amount of curves that joined, who their bodies had the flexibility to move like thin sheets of satin, like the waves of water or the passage of wind in these desserts.

Feliciano was trapped, their hips moving in quite the provocative ways that he was surprised no other was being so shaken or moved by. Sure, some whistles were blown, some callings heard, but it never interrupted, it continued, a calling and showing of nature that was best not to intervene in. Soon enough Feliciano found his foot tapping, his own claps going along with a rhythm that the group did not fail to miss. They all smirked, a conjunctive idea that Dua showed by coming close to Feliciano, offering her hands into welcome. Feliciano trembled, close to denying, he couldn’t possibly, he knew nothing, it was not his culture, what if he did something insulting?

“Come on! I’ll teach you,” Dua still offered, and Feliciano couldn’t hold himself from the temptation any longer.

With a smile, a whisper of words to Pookie so he could remain in his original sitting watching, he moved forward to join along with the rest of the spinning figures. Dua and Feliciano took their spot to practice, she showed him all the exact movements, both moving together, incorporating themselves with the rest with each new forwarding step.

To help them better move, many began removing much of their clothing, revealing arms, hips, and stomachs, some even their chests. Feliciano played along by removing many of his

upper wear, his chest revealed to the cooling air, uncaring of the many wanting eyes he received, including those of his arising King.

To Ludwig, it was all scandalous, how Feliciano smirked, how his hands moved freely as if calling for someone to caress that creamy expanse of his skin. His back seemed to wave to him, a movement to his hips that Ludwig never thought he would blush or even drool about. And Feliciano continued on, uncaring to how heated he got Ludwig, gripping harshly the cup he still held with his drink, trying to look away, trying to find some distraction, but everything, even the music, seemed to be calling his eyes to his arising Queen, to his allure, to his smile, his beauty, even his jealousy as he saw him thread a teasing finger in Haris's hair as he passed trying to find a place to sit. Ludwig felt this sudden need to punch him if he dared join him in that array of too revealing dancing. Luckily, Haris moved away, laughing, joining some other members who continued to eat while they gladly watched. Ludwig eased, deciding it was best he enjoyed as well, although his eyes only remained on Feliciano's appetizing figure, thoughts coming unto his mind that he tried so hard to hide ever since his growing sexual urges.

Feliciano was a childhood friend, his arising Queen who denied his proposal, and he was-… just best to keep his thoughts away from such carnal and lustful thoughts, even with a continuing stare on him that Feliciano began to feel. In one moment their eyes met, and to both their surprises, neither looked away, they remained glued, readying, a certain power in them that had Feliciano moving the more seductively, the more arches, the widening of his mouth, of tongue licking his lips, and lastly, even a wink and a smile.

That did it to Ludwig. He looked away, he stood, he moved back to the boats to find some of the water basins and drench his head in it along with the dirty thoughts. Pookie seemed to be chuckling as he flew behind him. Ludwig decided then to inspect one of the trunks, checking on the Spheres of Validity, but instead, the first thing he met was the red collar Gilbert had given him, the one that cut reproduction magic if one wanted to- he slammed the trunk closed.

Of all the things that survived from the attack.

After pondering, trying to focus instead on training exercises in his book, his usual physical training, he returned back to the group, all the figure now sitting, in silent speaking, the music dimmed, the group slowly falling into tiredness.

"You never heard about Zubaida's story?" Gupta asked Feliciano.

"Until I came here, no. Hearts tends to focus mostly on their own."

"Understandable, many of the Hearts legends are incredible," one complimented.

"Romulus's tale is one of my favorites," Dua said as she finished her last drink for the night.

"How do you feel about him being one of your ancestors?" Haris asked, close and near, angering Ludwig as always.

“It’s…really not something that changes anything about me. Like to all of you, Romulus’s tale is just another story from the many I’ve heard, although more in tied with me since he is one of my great grandfathers and a symbol of my family…but…that’s about it, I’m more curious about other things,”

“Like what?”

“Like…knowing about my great grandmother instead, Augusta.” The question was still alive in Feliciano’s mind even after the months that passed. It surprised Ludwig and earned a raise of his head.

Feliciano was still nowhere close to knowing, disgrace slouching him, slightly hating his ignorance and the very world’s for not letting her own story be more alive, for him to know, for him to see, and maybe he could finally get why…-he gazed over to Ludwig, who quickly turned away once he saw him trying to connect their eyes again. After that last smile and wink, it was best not to revive anything else between them.

“Romulus’s wife, his Queen at the time,” they all at least recognized, but no other words where shared of a beginning of a new story, an idea, a telling.

“Yes…I…need to know much more of her.” Feliciano gazed over to the mark on his finger, as if it could hold some hint, as if it could tell him. It was a mark given to him by the Aces after all, that all Queens held, surely even Augusta.

“Isn’t she the one about the song, the one…um, the one you Heartians are always singing!” Haris tried to remind.

“What’s it called, um, be mine, accept to be yours, accept to be-” Gupta continued to guess.

“Accept to be mine,” Feliciano corrected.

“Ah yes! That one!” Gupta pointed.

“That’s all it is, a song.” One only about her love and loyalty to Romulus.

“A lovely song still,” Dua dreamed.

The players began to try and play the song in their instruments from what they knew in memory, but in honesty it wasn’t tuned, it was lost, and even pretty hurtful to the ears. Feliciano had to save this before it became any worst.

From one of his well-protected pockets, he took out the golden chest, his music box, what he decided would always be on him, especially after the attack at the train. He opened, all silencing for the melody that began to play. Feliciano let it sound for the duration of the whole song, for the players to learn, to tune their instruments, blow and beat in the right ways that would fit along with the tiny thing in the arising Queen’s hands.

“I’ll journey and see beyond the lines of our kingdom,
Never a fear to be lost, never a fear to fall,

In pleasure, I will take the mysteries of what I could meet,
If you accept to be mine, my Queen."

Feliciano found himself singing, once the chest went back to repeating the song after it first ended.

"No heat, no cold, will stop me of my search,
No sun, no rain to go against my strength,
Just promise me your hand,
And love me in our eternity."

He wanted it to be a whisper, but he couldn't control the feeling it gave him, which heightened his voice for all to hear, stopping once he noticed that an eerie silence settled, all eyes on him, attentive to his voice. He became shy, nearing to close the chest.

"Please, no!" Dua stopped him.

"Continue," Haris asked him.

Confident, he smiled, and continued on, new found bravery that helped him enunciate the song.

"My sun, my moon, my land, my love,
I know it's a journey you will overcome,
But I don't need you to go so far,
I want you here to kiss me.

Would you want all the gold I will find for you?
Would you like the songs I will bring from afar for you?
Would you accept me as your shield?
And would you want me always by your side?"

The players began to join in Feliciano's singing, just as beautiful as the chest, as loving, as serene, bringing to all quite a relaxation that made them all begin to lean down to the ground in rest.

"I don't want any of the riches you will bring,
I don't care for any of the songs,
I only want you to hold,
I only want your arms around me.

Bring me your love, your kisses, your loyalty,
Your passion, your hope, your defeat,
Your promise, your weakness, your strength,
I will keep it all in my heart."

Ludwig was just as taken by the spell of his voice, by the familiarity of this song, memories of their dances, of the many times they sang. He couldn't help it as he began to word it under

his breath, truly silent, his eyes pretending to be ignorant to the figure that shone above everything with his singular song.

“I’ll journey and see beyond the lines of our kingdom,
Never a fear to be lost, never a fear to fall,
In pleasure, I will take the mysteries of what I could meet,
If you accept to be mine, my King.”

The players knew it was over, laying down the instruments, yawns shared, stretching, tired eyes that wanted nothing more than their beds. Feliciano closed his music chest and guessed it was time they should all head to sleep.

Some rested on their beds on the boats, others camped out on the ground, but they all awakened the same the next morning, some with headaches, with back pains, or their bodies hurting, potions shared between them to ail it. Ludwig and Feliciano this time helped with everything that was needed to pack back into the boats, the two of them now friendly in the group after the small feast last night. They chattered aimlessly between themselves, Ludwig distracted in his conversation with another fellow, but it didn’t stop his gaze from spotting something that flared him to his furthest anger.

Feliciano had been helping Haris with picking many of the tents, in the process, they had picked one together without noticing, pulling each other until they stumbled together, too close, laughing, Haris gracefully detangling Feliciano from himself with a single move of his arm, which maintained a hold, a smirk, a wink, one that reddened Feliciano’s cheeks. Feliciano moved away to work on something else, leaving Haris behind to look at features from Feliciano that was definitely not in his right to see. Ludwig instantly dropped what he was doing, harsh steps moving toward him, loud enough for the other to turn away from whatever he had been staring at. Haris grew fearful, for the look and stance Ludwig was directing at him showed nothing else but killing intent.

“Listen, I’ve had enough of this,” Ludwig harshly pointed, all his facial lines meeting in one pierce of anger that seemed to shine with the purest of fires. “I don’t know what game you’re playing at, or what you’re trying to achieve here, but it’s one you’re forbidden to and you’re threading too dangerously on. Feliciano is an arising Queen, my future Queen, and you will do well to stay in your line, not get any closer, or even spare him so much as a glance from now on, because I swear, I will-” he didn’t finish it, because that’s when he noticed the silence that fell, all the eyes that stared at him, dumbfounded and wide eyed to witness the arising King of Hearts get so defended, so maddening and well…-Harris could only chuckle despite.

“Easy, easy, you really need to calm down, your highness,” he seemed to mock, which maintained some still firing anger in Ludwig. “I admit, Feliciano is adorable and a pleasure to be around, but I am aware clearly that I should not let it go too far. There is nothing between us but teasing and maybe some small flirts, but not enough to worry, not enough for you to suddenly go rampaging.” Now Haris was clearly maddened, rolling his eyes, trying to keep calm in his voice; if he threaded too dangerously things could become more violent, and he really did not want it to reach that height. “As long as I’m concerned, Feliciano denied his

marriage to you, and for now, you have no entitlement as to who he could be with. If I want to flirt with him, I will, because between the both of us, I actually know how to do it right without hurting him or slinging insults his way and still treat him like the respectable arising Queen he is." He returned the same anger in his eyes, that Ludwig did well to stand strong against, both actually fearful to the other, but neither would hint it to all the eyes that stared to them. "Don't go around preaching who he should be with or not after you failed yourself to reach that accord. If you really love him- as we all already know you do-" That was the push, that was the sudden weakness he showed, and Haris couldn't help but grin at it. Really, it was so obvious. "You would stop being so possessive and jealous and actually do something righteous and loving to earn him as any man or woman should justly do," he shouted in fierceness, hoping that it would be something that would remain well in his head, that would remind him, that would hopefully change something in his behavior that Haris found so annoying.

With a grunt he remembered he had work to do, so he moved away back to business, even with the several eyes on him that he tried to ignore. Ludwig could learn to be uncaring to the rest as well, but he could not ignore Feliciano's, which he spotted as soon as Haris moved away.

It was startled, fearsome, a frozen expression in his spot, proof enough to Ludwig that he had seen and even heard all of this confrontation. The embarrassment really hit him then, the indiscretion, the trembling, the gripping. At least his anger had subsided, but in it replaced embarrassment and fault, a wish to return everything and not make him seem like the heartless fool he already knew Feliciano saw him as.

The brunet came closer, nervous steps, hoping he could tell him something, hoping he could make him realize. "I'm sorry but…he was right," Feliciano was courageous enough to admit.

Ludwig only nodded, too embarrassed to look him in the eye at the moment, anybody's eyes actually. "You don't need to apologize for it…if anything I should be the one to…" their eyes met, and Ludwig was lost, he was conflicted, he was weak, he wanted to erase, he wanted to distract, so he turned once again, forget it as everything. Feliciano sighed disappointedly and tried to hide his groan. "Let's just…get on the boats and…leave."

Feliciano agreed to that, both deciding to board together, if even with distance between them.

It was only one more stop.

Chapter 34

It was an awkward ride, one in which neither Haris nor Ludwig spoke or even stood in Feliciano's proximity. He rolled his eyes at this behavior, settling instead on speaking with Gupta, of Egypt, of ancient stories of the Arabic provinces and how it played into part with the rest of the other provinces. As Gupta told, Feliciano sketched in his notebook, becoming creative and adding details that wondered many who sat by him. Feliciano asked about the messaging tubes, which Gupta explained to detail their mechanisms so Feliciano could replicate in his notebook.

"If I may ask, what are you doing this for?"

"To show King Francis! If he knows of their importance and how amazing they are, he'll surely fund it more and maybe you can use it in more provinces around the kingdom. Once I'm back, I'll see if I can add it to all of Hearts as well."

Gupta was flattered, although a part of him still doubted, still wanted to get Feliciano to stop his generosity, but what could it hurt to try. He shrugged and let it all be. Either nothing will make a change, or things continued as they were, which he had no problem with anyways.

It was another day of traveling, all ending with a night approach to Tehran. Being close to the border of the French province, Tehran had a mix of dessert and yellow fauna that was peculiar and quite a relief to both Ludwig and Feliciano, who were used to this kind of flourishing nature. It stood with a backdrop of hardened mountains, covered in white snow, their night arrival giving them a chance to see the tall buildings light up one by one like shimmering stones. It was the biggest of all the cities they had visited, its grandness rather intimidating, like any turn would give them something new, but new ways to lose themselves in. Luckily they had the Joker group, who now had to sail on with different insignias and flags to not be discovered. Sand rower boats were not uncommon in the city, the very streets were prepared for them, which is why they still continued their riding even through these dense populations, busier streets, a fast pace that reminded Ludwig and Feliciano of Berlin. They continued until they arrived to their final spot, the goal of this detour, and that was the train station.

With no announcement of their arrivals, the locals walked on like any other night in the city, not paying mind to even these travelers who stood on their own with their dirty wears and singular uniforms. Ludwig and Feliciano admitted that it was more comfortable to take down their things, to walk down the station at ease, with new trunks, new clothes, new bags, and even the rest of the group behind as guardians and watchers. No one recognized them, Ludwig and Feliciano thinking it had to do with the missing of red and hearts symbols in their clothing, their covered heads, even their calm as they moved forward down the station. It was the same way as they got their tickets, as they reached the area they were to board. Other men gave the offer of picking their things, ushering into the wagon that was meant to be theirs, just about ready to take. Ludwig and Feliciano took out theirs scarfs and any of their covering, trusting the sudden emptiness in the area as everyone busied and got distracted with getting on their train.

“You’ve all been so wonderful!” Feliciano complimented, with deep emotions, of sorrows of having to depart.

“Promise you’ll write,” Dua answered with the same fault, offering her arms and herself for an embrace, which Feliciano gladly took, comfort in it of a dear friend.

“We’ll offer reports back to Berlin,” Gupta assured.

“But please, also write and let us know you arrived to Paris well.” Haris offered his own embrace and Feliciano let himself join along in one, and to his surprise, Ludwig didn’t do or say anything. It didn’t go to more than that, Feliciano moved away, bright promise in his eyes and even in his movements as he turned and made way for his boarding, Pookie taking rest in his curls now, confident and sure for a safe trip this time.

It was Ludwig’s turn to wish his goodbyes, with handshakes, bows, and even simple thanks in his eyes. It was the same that he wanted to show Haris, as to not let any kind of resentments be alive between them. When he stood before him, ready, even with the still present anger in their eyes, Haris took a harsh grip of Ludwig’s shoulder. Everyone was expecting the worst, getting ready to depart whatever this could form into, but nothing of the sort awakened. Haris only pulled Ludwig near, enough for his mouth to lean into his ear, to whisper in menace.

“I hope you take into consideration what I told you. Feliciano is a beautiful person, inside and out, the kind that any would fight and protect even against the wrath of all the kingdoms. I see you love him, there’s devotion, commitment…as he does for you. You two have a strong bond that Khaos would think twice before attacking. I sense he will be a Queen to be remembered for the ages, and you still have enough time to prove yourself to him, to be just as an amazing and remembered King.” His grip then strengthened, Ludwig fearing he would even claw against the fabric and break. “I hope the next time I see you, you’re getting married to him and you are both being crowned powerful leaders.” And just like that he pushed him, looking away uncaringly, giving all the space for him to leave.

Ludwig was rather struck, hazed, suddenly forgetting where he was even standing. A bell reminded him, rushing quick to board once he noticed that the doors were soon to close. He waved to them all, taking his seat next to Feliciano, who joined along in goodbyes, continuing even as the train began its movements, until it dashed off the station, the joker group behind them.

They were finally off surely to France.

As soon as the train left the station, Ludwig and Feliciano used the night ride to sleep, only to be awakened the early morning to French welcomes, signs showing them their arrival to Besancon. Here they saw the surrounding and activity that they had missed throughout the Arabic provinces. Crowds already awaited them, waves and shouts, all to which Ludwig and Feliciano were hurried across by countless of guards until they arrived at a secluded area where their coach was awaiting them. The only words they shared with the guards were those of relief for their arrival, telling them on how the kingdom rushed once King Francis received the letters. All the kingdoms had been worried, all remaining a watchful eye to Besancon to make sure that they both arrived as safely as they started. It explained the big celebratory air

and the amount of people there. They didn't play much part in it though, they had Ludwig and Feliciano settling in the coach ride quick to their next stop, Paris.

It took them an entire day of riding, their arrival to Paris late in the night, but what a chance it gave them at this hour. Shimmering, glowing, like a feast of stars and shine, as golden and yellow as the national colors, showcasing light, competing with the stars, large, beautiful, a class and richness that Feliciano admitted Berlin stood very differently from. He wished he could have stopped the coach to give him a better chance to sketch that first gleam into the city, but the rush was still evident, one that really didn't give Ludwig or Feliciano the real chance to see and admire as it was meant to.

The buildings didn't tower here in crafted art, in fact, the only one that did was the metal and yellow diamond encrusted landmark of the Eifel tower, which like the castle in Berlin, could be noticeable from whatever point in the city you stood from. It was rather weird that their palace didn't stand up as high as that, but grounded, squared, but indeed large, brightening high in gold and exaggerated extravagancies that even Ludwig and Feliciano thought was too much for the royals of the kingdom. The guards made sure that no crowd accumulated at its entrance, quickly working to get the royals down, even ushering them down the halls of the highest golden opulence and art that compared to the ones in the Berlin castle. Feliciano wished he could depart from the guards' harsh grips and powerful eyes and really look at the art one by one as he usually did back in his own castle. To the guards it didn't matter, they pushed, they pulled, all until they reached grandiose double doors, crafted with similar stories of the ones Ludwig and Feliciano had seen as they had gone through the Arabic provinces, only with characteristics and figures more similar to the citizens of the French and Swiss provinces. They opened, Ludwig and Feliciano momentarily blinded by the harsh light that illuminated. The room extended in their welcome, shinning in gold, in whites, in marble, yellow, heavy flags and symbols hanging from every available spot, being careful not to hide the paintings and intricate designs carved into pillars, ceilings, corners, even the large three thrones at the bottom, just as excessively carved as the whole room, with large golden rays behind all three to make it seem like a new coming sun was arising right from these seats of power. Ludwig and Feliciano easily understood that this was supposed to be the throne room, much larger than their own in Hearts, more heavily decorated, more majestic, more riches. They had to admit that they were rather jealous.

The guards closed the doors behind them, leaving them both alone, suddenly confused, but it didn't last long when they heard rushing steps coming to replace the fault of presence.

"You have finally arrived!" They recognized Francis's cheering voice, coming with hurry, trying to make his entrance just as shinning as the very room.

It would have been amazing and very Francis-like…if he didn't come to them naked with only but a long silk robe trailing behind him like a golden river…actually this was very Francis-like now that Ludwig though about it.

"Thank the Aces! You have no idea of the pleasure I feel at seeing you two arrive well! You must immediately speak to me about what happened! Feliciano, dear, are you-"

"Could you cover yourself? For Aces' sake, this is your throne room, you're supposed to be receiving guests in a palace, not a brothel!" Ludwig suddenly shouted, bringing Feliciano

forward into his embrace, covering his arising Queen's eyes from this high indecency.

Francis looked deeply insulted about this, taking a high breath, a harsh grip of his hand on his chest. "I greet you like this, an image that any would beg to witness in their lifetime and yet you scorn and push it away! It is my castle and I decide to greet my guests however wish!"

"That's really cool. I want to do something like that in the Hearts castle, Ludwig."

"We certainly will not! There is no need to constantly be showing yourself like this unless specific occasions, but this is none! Feliciano and I just returned from a train attack in our kingdom, saved by Joker Vikings, then having to confide on a group of Joker bandits across the desserts of the Arabic provinces, and you dare greet us with that thing!" Ludwig pointed directly to Francis's free penis and hairy legs. Once again Francis looked insulted, but he still struck a pose hoping to change the arising King's mind.

"Oh for fucks sake, I can't believe you actually did this," another voice joined, arming himself with a sword, preparing the pommel to hit his King to order if it was necessary.

"Francis, I'm sure there are other chances for these kinds of moments, but right now, it was rather inappropriate." A young girl joined as well, Ludwig and Feliciano spotting as Vash and Lili entered, wearing more appropriate yellow dresses and suits.

Children embarrassed about an adult's doing, it looked rather comical to Feliciano as he tried to suppress a chuckle.

"I just wanted them to know that they can get comfortable," Francis pouted.

"Scarred them you did," Vash had no problem with harshly admitting.

"I preferred that you didn't show it this way. I'll write it down for the next time we have guests," Lili already organized and planned, with an ever refine air of queen grace.

She moved forward, offering her bows and kinds eyes as greeting to these royals, and of course, her cousin Ludwig. "Welcome to Paris, welcome to our palace. We're deeply sorry for the kind of journey you both had to suddenly take, we should have been more careful when we prepared our route of arrival. You dealt with what you could honorably, as King and Queen should. We will make your stay here for the next couple of days as comfortable as we can in tribute to it. Please, make yourself at homes, don't be afraid to seek anything you want, whatever it is, we will do our best to attend."

What grand maturity for her age, a strong Queenly dealing despite being in her arising years, amazing tributes that already made her fitting for the job. Feliciano was eager for the day she would grow into a regal Queen, one he would be happy and proud to work alongside with and share in a tittle.

"Thank you, you're all so kind, we'll make good use of it!" Feliciano appreciated it all, giving another bow of thanks. As he did so, Pookie took the position as a chance to fly off, draw himself near to the arising Diamond Queen, nuzzling her, purring and cuddling like any

small kitten would do. Sure, it was surprising, but Lili found herself giving him the same amount of pets and cuddles, finding it incredibly adorable.

“Who is this?” She asked, with glee that let one see the truth of her age.

“This is Pookie, he decided to join us on the trip somehow,” Feliciano quickly explained.

“Oh, I thought he was some sort of past pet."

“I rather not think it. We speculate it might have been sent by the Aces,” Ludwig told, hoping Lili could easily understand that she had to treat the creature with more respect.

Her eyes had momentarily widened and she suddenly stilled, afraid suddenly that this little winged lion could grow and devour her into bits. But how could it? It was being so cute, begging for more cuddles and touches, wanting rest, food, and surely any kind of pampering. Lili took it into a welcoming and friendly embrace, creature of the Aces or not.

“We will lead you to your room ” Vash ushered them away, wanting instant peace after all this, one Ludwig wanted as well.

Their stay in Paris was meant for four days, a little too much Ludwig thought, who wanted the new Spheres of Validity made instantly the next morning so they could leave to the Spades Kingdom that very night. But no, Feliciano wanted a tour of the city and Francis happily obliged to give him one. Ludwig joined along if only to watch over Feliciano since Francis tended to be just as spaced as him…and as touchy. Scenic walks, artistic buildings, rivers with proud bridges of gold, all trees and flowers trimmed to hang by the walls in perfect harmony, one the movement of the streets went along with, one Francis and Feliciano did well to easily match as they ran, as they skipped, as they twirled, hanged, pointed, even sang. It was all annoying and hard for Ludwig to follow, but he still trailed behind, a scoff here and there that Francis and Feliciano did well to ignore. Sometimes, when Feliciano pointed to beautiful flowered balconies, had Ludwig try Crème brûlée, or pulled him so he could tell him some romantic tale to a wall, grove, or balcony, Ludwig would actually fall at ease to these pulls by Feliciano, smiling and forming if even a small part of it. It didn’t escape Francis’s sights, who would snicker, make notes and plot with evil grins. They would return exhausted, but with an exquisite dinner prepared by the high rated chefs of the palace awaiting them. Francis insisted that they should only be served by the best, proud of the moans and alighted eyes as they took their bites and tastes.

Feliciano at one point grew very interested with the gardens of the palace, if the lateness, if they were tired, and Francis still stood up and lead him forward, glad to show him. They took their time, there were a variety of flowers, of trees, of statues, fountains, and even mazes that led to hidden beautiful groves, stories that had Feliciano’s eyes alight, hurriedly drawing on his sketchbook. This time, Ludwig watched on, from the heights of a large balcony, where he intended not to leave from until Feliciano returned back from his viewing. He didn’t care about all this excess, this flamboyancy and gold, his eyes were only on his arising Queen, watching, trying to tell himself that his smile was not shinning his being, that the way his curls bounced and how he alighted and rushed quickly down rocked roads wasn’t raising the

beat of his heart, the gripping of his hands around a glass he was drinking, holding from letting this fountain of emotions pour, which will make him blush, make him accept, make him run down there and…

“-Lovely night isn’t it?” Another figure joined, the delicate figure of the arising Queen of Diamonds, his young cousin, standing gorgeously beside him, gazing on to the proud beauty of the gardens, taking the fresh air and the beautiful stars of the sky, if even slightly hazed by the lights of the city.

“Uh…yeah, yeah it is,” Ludwig quickly uttered, breaking his heavy gaze on Feliciano, settling on the horizons, nothing in particular.

Lili still noticed, chuckling dimly, a playful smirk and look in her eyes that was rare for Ludwig to see in her, one that he didn’t even expect. “Feliciano is beautiful too,” Lili dared point out.

Ludwig chocked on his drink, deciding on stopping, placing the glass elsewhere, trying to get his earlier strong composure, trying to seem unfazed, but Lili could see past it.

“He’s going to be the Italian Queen your kingdom dreamed of having, and you’re the powerful German King the kingdom needs. I’m glad I’ll be able to see your reign, watch it grow, hope that you’re both an inspiration to a whole new line of rulers,” she dreamed, but Ludwig could only scoff.

“If we are ever crowned."

“Oh but you will."

“Not until we find a way to cancel our engagement from the Aces…or until Feliciano decides to go through with the marriage, which is unlikely.”

“Unlikely? You protected him well in your attack and capture, in your passage through the Sahara desert, you even joined them along in a tour around the city.” She pointed to them just as they headed out from a line of bushes, Feliciano interested in seeing a whole area of peonies closer to the entrance of the castle, where they could be seen more clearly to Lili and Ludwig.

“It’s still not enough…I didn’t…” He was admitting this, he was being honest, he was coming in accord with it, surely from an air of trust that Lili emanated, that Ludwig could confide in. “I didn’t treat him as I should, especially with our tittles, especially after we were dear friends when we were children. I’ve done many wrongs, I proved well enough to him that it cannot return to that, that he cannot see me with the expected lights of the kingdom, which is why he refused the marriage.”

“But didn’t you want it?”

He was silent for a long while, the only sound between them being the air that blew, Ludwig hoping it could give him a good answer. “It’s what should be done for the good of the kingdom, I’m only compliant to do as should be expected of me.” With point, with finality,

like there was nothing else that needed to be discussed, but Lili was determined to not leave it at that.

“I’m not asking the kingdom, I’m asking you. Did you want this?” She pushed on, with a sudden seriousness and intensity that Ludwig never knew she could utter. “If you can admit that you’ve done him wrong, that you can see it, why can’t you change it? Why can’t you really show him that things could be like they used to? I’m sure Feliciano would give you a chance if you really proved yourself once again. It can’t be that hard, you have all this time by yourselves now.” Lili still hoped on to change his mind.

He remained just as strong to her pestering, only giving her a small scolding glare, enough in it to tell her that she shouldn’t thread on this, that she should turn back before it could get any worst.

Wind blowing, trees rustling, shouts and laughs from Francis or Feliciano interrupting any calm nature uttered for them in their higher place. After the longing settled enough, petrified as a statue, Ludwig finally broke it with a tired sigh, a hanging in his eyes, depth and greyness that did well to take any shinning color away from him.

This was the exact same thing his grandfather had asked some time ago, and he would only answer the same way as he had done.

“Nothing you should concern about, nothing you should know, nothing you can understand. This is my situation to handle and I will deal with it as properly as I can. That’s all I’m going to say.”

And indeed it was. Lili did not receive another word, not even a whisper.

The next day, Francis and Feliciano decided to spend their day at the palace, in easy paces as they explored the halls, hidden or open ones, but all showcasing gold and art, shine and diamonds, perfect sunlight to go along with the bounce of their steps.

“I’ve visited all four palaces of the four main capitals of each kingdom, and mine, there is nothing like it. More elegance than any other, beauty and refinery. Don’t you think so?” Francis asked Feliciano as they entered one of his study rooms.

“It is beautiful, but I simply cannot betray my own castle. It’s like you said, there’s nothing like your castle. Just as my own stands special, it’s my own home and I wouldn’t choose any other.”

Francis had to understand, so he didn’t say anything else, ushering Feliciano to explore the books in his study room instead, along with Pookie, who flew about the whole room inspecting everything just as Feliciano.

“Everything you need to know about the kingdom is right here. I also have picture books that I’m sure you’ll be interested in."

“Which reminds me!” It was the perfect time to talk about this, Pookie settling back in Feliciano’s shoulder to give him some support. He took out his sketchbook, leafing through all kinds of drawings about his journey up till now, settling then in the pictures he had drawn about Gupta’s tube messaging system.

“I really need you to see this! This could do wonders to your kingdom, and the others too! It was created by Gupta Muhammad Hassan of the Egyptian province of the Diamond Kingdom.”

They both took sitting in one of the many desks, with Feliciano pointing, explaining, Francis truly interested and wondered, asking questions, even plotting ways it could be added to the castle, how they could make connection tubes to Hearts and Spades.

“Gupta told me the monarchy never really showed interest in this.”

“How could it be possible I was never shown? My messengers never sent me anything like this,” Francis pointed, quite disappointed. This could have served well from long ago.

“What about the Queen and Jack?”

“No matter what Vash might say, they are in fact just teenagers and sometimes it’s best I do not drown them in so much work when they are still learning and accommodating to this lifestyle. For now, everything is sent to me unless I deem it fine for Lili and Vash to deal with.” He studied the drawings more, putting more of his mind into it, seeing if there was something he could even improve, but as they were was enough.

“You think it was the messengers then?” Feliciano wondered.

“To be honest, we just have an ancient system that really doesn’t like to accept anything well from the Arabic provinces. Has to do with a civil war that was fought in the kingdom long ago.” As King, he should really begin work to eradicate it. “It is true that in the palace we tend to focus mostly on the smaller and closer provinces to the capital, those more to the east tend to deal with most things by themselves. Thanks to the civil war, even more after the war of the blackened decades, trust was just easily lost.” Silence settled as Francis felt like the fault was in his own hand, product of lines and centuries that caused this.

“It’s never too late to try and fix it. You should reunite the main leaders of each of these provinces and start by creating this. Quicker and closer communication can help and thus it can strengthen your kingdom. Who knows what might happen that you might need your combined efforts. I’m confident that you could do this well, Francis,” Feliciano said rather wisely, with the maturity of a Queen.

Francis couldn’t help but feel proud. Feliciano had grown, handsome and beautiful, standing tall and sure, yet he still rubbed his hair like the child he had met him as, that still shone in his cheeks, eyes, and smile. “You’re growing my little one,” Francis told him, finishing in writing his notes, making his own sketches in one of his empty notebooks. “I’ll take a better look at this and start the process to contact this Gupta. We will immediately start work on this and it would be amazing to have his presence here for it.” He really moved away, confident in

its doing, preparing papers, planning which parts of the castle to go to start with these messages.

“I’m glad I could bring this forward, and I’m so glad you’re giving it this chance.” Feliciano even bowed, the proudness bouncing in his aura.

“Indeed, now-” He still had some other plans to work on, and after sending these messages, he could start to work with the little arising Queen of Hearts. “Feliciano, my dear, there’s something I would really like for you to try.” He caught Feliciano’s wide interest and curiosity, already moving forward, easing into whatever this could be.

“What is it?”

Francis only smirked and led him forward into new halls.

Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

> Sorry for taking my time, but as always, university and other personal matters. As always, patience, and I hope you enjoy this chapter.

Like Francis and Feliciano, Ludwig had decided on remaining in the palace for the day. With this free time, he strolled the gardens, drawn by its beauty like any other, taking sitting in one of the many banks to continue his reading from his book.

He had been practicing some small wind spells when he spotted an exercise in the very section in which an arising King and Queen (or just King and Queen) could use to start the combining and mending of their power. It was another wind spell, one both he and even Feliciano had to know well before they could try to do it together.

Yes, he could speak with him about this, they could start to do it.

With how things were looking, it was starting to become a dire need that they started learning well how to use the combination of their power. What if they were attacked again? What if something else went wrong on the journey? What if something happens once they reached the holding field? What if…he had to close the book before his mind could wander off in that aspect. It was getting late, a servant had come to tell him that dinner was served, and he walked eagerly to it hoping it could bring him some mental peace.

He had eaten with only the presence of his cousins, Francis and Feliciano never appearing even for when dessert was served. Once he was done, he settled off to go find them, trying to look calm and ordered, but inside, there was rage, one he was ready to direct to the King of Diamonds.

He was reaching the living quarters, a place he rather not find Feliciano alone with Francis in, but it was his first clue to reaching them. Just as he was ready to knock one of the large doors, Francis instead opened wide, extending, showing off behind him a very large closet (Okay, so apparently this wasn't his rooms), with suits, coats, pants, shoes, robes, jewelry, armor, seals, sashes, just about everything needed for the outer appearance of a King and space and mirrors to strut and show. Ludwig would have been more impressed…if Francis hadn't dared shown himself naked once again, with only but that large silk golden robe he had worn the night they had arrived.

"Mon chéri, Ludwig, you have finally found us!" He exalted, with flair and dramatization that had Ludwig rolling and adverting eyes, completely uninterested, much to Francis hurt of pride.

“Where is Feliciano?” Ludwig instantly asked.

“What makes you think he’s here?” He seemed to challenge.

“He’s been with you all day and I’m sure you were both ready to spend the entire night doing nonsense that will make him loose needed sleep. Besides, I can see Pookie.” Ludwig pointed to the little lion resting in one of the many sofas of the room, shinning in comfort and peace, proof enough to Ludwig that they hadn’t done anything illicit.

Francis, instead of being disappointed, grinned, his whole body looking like it was chuckling. “Well, if you insist to know, I only recommend you come inside and see.” He moved aside to present him entrance, but Ludwig was always so hesitant, raising an eyebrow and maintaining his still put place in the hall. “Come in, come in! This is a room of peace, confidence, power, creativity-” he took his arm and pulled him in, to a depth of the room away from any escape. Ludwig thought it was incredible how easily he succumbed to it, letting himself be placed by Francis in a designated spot, away from hangers and shelves, to an open space with even pillars, carpets, flags and views into the city. Francis excelled in even the way he had to show off his wardrobe, the lights of the city outside the window a reminder of the eyes he was trying to look well to. Ludwig couldn’t believe this, he didn’t think a person’s ego could reach such heights of plethora.

“-and romance,” he whispered lastly, too close to Ludwig’s ear, the breaths one he quickly brushed away when Francis settled off to give his attention to some other curtained entrance.

“Feli, my dear, have you finally finished?” He called.

“Mhm, it’s true what you said Francis-” Feliciano pushed open the curtains and revealed himself, heading out with ease and confidence to his wear. “It’s so soft and breezy.” He twirled, showing his own long silk robe, in red, sewn with shinning symbols of the Hearts Kingdom to match with him, to dance along as he span the room proud. He wore a red flower crown on his hair, some dangling red jeweled necklaces along with his own promise cross. Only simplistic details, it was worthless to add more when the robe itself held all that was needed for attention. It was just like Francis’s, as long, as shinning and…as exposing.

“It’s stunning! I’m so glad you had one made for me! I only hope I can make some space in the-” Feliciano stopped the embraces of himself, of trying to reach every length, dropping it all to its usual bareness when his eyes locked with Ludwig. “Oh…Ludwig! What do you think? Francis insisted that I wore it and I’m happy I did. I absolutely love it!” He extended it to show, which in turn had the frontal opening growing, letting the collar and sleeves fall slightly down his shoulders, caressing his skin softly, taunting Ludwig to see the way his body shone in perfection along the robe.

Ludwig was halted in a haze, widened eyes in lost wonder, traveling across every inch of Feliciano’s skin that he hadn’t seen in years. He had grown to the expected splendors, slimmed but with ample softness in areas that made him the more seducing, the more exquisite and alluring. Never did Ludwig feel this need to extend his hands, to touch, kiss, bite and make it all his as it should.

Did Feliciano notice the longing look he gave him? Because he was starting to look back just as transfixed, loving this attention he was receiving from his arising King, hands trailing over his own shoulder, his face, his curls, granting a chance for Ludwig to look and admire as he wanted.

As one last torturous teasing, Feliciano reached down and played with the promise necklace, a reminder to Ludwig of what could be his, of what he could have to proudly love…if only he learned, if only he could be more accepting.

"It's uh…it's uh…" Ludwig was speechless, any word he had taken by being lost in the glistening of his brown eyes, on the expectant expression that wanted the finality to those words, the answer to his question. "Nice…yeah um…nice, uh…Francis, you did a good job."

Feliciano was disappointed but…it was something, only Francis didn't seem to mind it, since the stubborn German prince actually gave him a compliment, if even simple.

"I just had it commissioned, the true artists were the designers and sewers, and Feliciano here who wears it divinely." He took his hand and spun him in giggles and vitality. "If anything we can get your sizes right now and have one made for you, Ludwig." Francis even got the measurement tape ready.

"I rather not, not my style." Ludwig raised his hand and halted Francis from whatever movement to complete this.

"Nonsense, this kind robe is for all, even if somebody of your robustness and unseemly features."

It only made Ludwig want to have one less.

"Enough, I came to take Feliciano to have his dinner. It's becoming late and he should soon be resting."

"Or you just finally want him for yourself after not having him the whole day." Neither Francis and Feliciano could tell if the flaring red Ludwig took was a blush or strengthening anger. "But you are right, it is getting late, my precious must go to be well fed and have good rest." Francis cooed to Feliciano, trying to distract from any growing hostility, but he seemed to worsen it with the way he caressed Feliciano's chin and nuzzled their noses together.

Ludwig gripped his fist and tried hard not to suddenly punch Francis out of this…but he had learned his lesson with Haris and he had to really hold himself if he didn't want to worsen it.

"I'll have the dinner served in your room," Francis proclaimed, with one last spin pushing Feliciano into Ludwig's protective arms the moment he saw he could trip. The result was not only having a feel of the fabric, but also an arm around free skin, as soft, as rich, and as tempting to wrap himself around it as the silk.

"In-in our room? The dining room should be enough."

“Nonsense! It’s a beautiful night, something by the balcony is more than enough, and you two should take advantage of it.”

“I already ate.”

“Then eat again! My cooks can serve more than enough. Go on, I’ll give the orders to have everything set in a couple of minutes.”

Feliciano nodded instantly, not minding at all, using the grip he had on Ludwig’s arm to shush him into denying this. “Thank you, Francis! I’ll see you tomorrow morning then?”

“Of course, it is the last day! We make our Spheres of Validity and you have your departure that very night. We must make use of whatever little free time we have.”

Before Ludwig could say a word, Feliciano glistened Francis with a big smile and a bow, and with his still strong hold on Ludwig’s arm, he pulled him out of the room, in a hurried dash like they were running from imminent terror. It was hard for Ludwig to keep up, especially with the robe behind Feliciano blinding or making him trip in their hurry.

Like Francis had said, indeed it was a beautiful night, stars shimmering, not a cloud in sight, the view of the city an addition of picturesque that Ludwig had to admit was relaxing and even enchanting. As suggested, they had their dinner by the balcony, presented to them in a cart while they sat in a long comfortable sofa. They had brought Feliciano a smoked trout salad, ham deviled eggs, onion confit, fougasse, and French toast with raspberry jam as a dessert, the only thing Ludwig took from since his earlier dinner had just been enough.

At first, he kept his distance from him, leaving him in his picking and eating, in his eyes taken by the views, by the architecture, even the cooling breeze that played around them. Perhaps they were too tired, perhaps it had just been a long day, perhaps Francis had put something in the fine wine he gave them with the dinner, or there was just some spell in the winds of this kingdom. Slowly, they neared to each other, a centimeter a second, in silence, in leaning, all until Feliciano could place his hands on Ludwig’s thighs and he could rest down on the grown potent of his shoulder. Sure, it had grown, much stronger and bigger than in their childhood, but still it was the same comfort, the same belonging, the same trust, he could rest there with all certitude no matter what might happen in the surroundings. Feliciano let out such a breath of relief, like this simple touch had returned to him any missing peace, like he was transported back in time to the feeling, but giving a chance this time for something new.

“Are you really going to keep wearing that?” Ludwig asked rather sweetly, looking down to notice that Feliciano was still dressed in the robe, his position doing enough to hide, but not the clarity of his chest and the length and softness of his legs.

Feliciano nodded, with a smile he even rubbed against his arm. “It’s so cozy, I think I’m going to wear it to sleep.” He even yawned as if to assure it.

“Won’t you get tangled in it?”

“No, it’s too soft and silky for it."

“I still better not find you on the floor the next morning.”

Feliciano giggled, “I won’t, besides, you’ll be there to catch me if it happens…won’t you?”

Ludwig starred down to him, not being able to look away, loving the way his lips parted, how his cheeks shone, the ever present shine in his eyes, but still tired and hoping for dream, lost in whatever sudden closeness they got at the moment. He let his hands slowly fall from the back of the sofa, Aces knew how hard he tried to keep it back there, but Feliciano’s skin and body seemed to call and he fell forward to it, letting his hand roam on his arm, comforting and accepting, easing Feliciano more into his hold.

“I haven’t let anything happen to you on this journey, and that’s something I will continue to make sure as it goes along.” He looked away, because he couldn’t give him more of a grasp, this couldn’t grow, he couldn’t settle into the temptation of kissing him, of telling him he loved him, he was already trespassing a line he had set for himself as it was, and to be honest, he was disappointed that he let this happen.

“I…shouldn’t be…doing this with you,” he finally worded, but none of them still stopped their movements. Ludwig’s hand continued to caress on his arm, and now Feliciano’s hands and fingers traced at his chest.

“Why though?” Feliciano questioned, dejection evident, but still settling his head more into his chest and the nape of his neck, hoping it could convince him more, hoping he could say, hoping he could finally know.

Silence only continued, because as always, Ludwig couldn’t say anything, he couldn’t explain, Feliciano wouldn’t understand, he would do something rash, something he had prepared long ago to not happen. He was planning to simply move out of it as he always did, beginning to move his hand away, to sitting straight, stand and make his way back into the room and forget he let this moment of weakness.

“No,” Feliciano stopped, grabbing the hand and placing it back where it was, back into its movements, its gentility and even love. Ludwig let himself be carried into it, caged once again to him, doing as he wished, as he himself longed to do.

“I know you don’t care…I know this will later mean nothing to you…but, please, let me enjoy this for now, let us stay like this, let me rest with you.” He cradled more into his hold, even wrapping his arms around him, and Ludwig did the same, continuing his caresses, both his hands now working on him, relaxing him into coming sleep.

Ludwig sighed, he gave up for the night, yearning to tell him that he had no idea what he would be willing to do for him. He held him tight as he would have liked to do every night, making sure Feliciano was easing over so slowly into sleep, eyes closed, breath slow, composure falling weak knowing he was resting in the shield of Ludwig’s arms. Ludwig leaned to place a gentle kiss on the top of his head, so dim Feliciano could have confused it as a harsh breeze in his sleep.

“You never stopped feeling so nice, Ludwig,” Feliciano uttered sleepily, his last trace of consciousness gone in that last breath of his name.

Like this, Ludwig didn’t know how he could go to sleep, when his mind was reacting, denying, fighting, all throughout still maintaining that hold Feliciano had gone to sleep in.

This was becoming worst, his plan was failing, but his heart was beating and it had been a while since he had felt this relax, this at peace, like he was ready to spend the rest of his days just like this. He yearned for that, maybe he really shouldn’t stand, maybe he should just give up to sleeping in this air with him like this, but the reminder repeated on his head, the horizon seemed to palpitate with the continuing journey, to where it led, to what he had to do.

With a sigh, he decided that he had given Feliciano enough, he was getting tired himself, any longer and he could relax into the idea of sharing the same bed. No, no, no, he bit his lip every time the desire grew stronger. He picked Feliciano up in his arms, being extra careful that his steps weren’t harsh enough to stir and wake him. He lay him to rest on his bed, taking the flower crown to place in the bedside table along with any other jewelry that seemed uncomfortable. He settled himself to sleep quickly after in his own bed, but not before gazing strongly to the face he adored, the figure of the most he loved, beautiful, captivating, his perseverance to continue and fight on.

He promised himself that these would be his last thoughts of devotion and love. He would settle them more on his mission from the next morning on.

Although they wouldn’t leave until late in the night, their luggage was packed and ready, added with a few new things Francis had gifted them. Dressed in appropriate suits of yellows, whites and creams of the kingdom, after their breakfast, they headed to the throne room, where it was expected that Francis, Lili and Vash would create the Spheres of Validity. When Francis entered, he came appropriately dressed, with a cape, jewels, and even a proud crown. Vash and Lili came as just, with their own regality and flowers, making the three shine together as united rulers that their people could put their trust in. Ludwig and Feliciano bowed to their welcome, and they did just the same, admiring that the yellows of their kingdom looked just as fine on the Heartian arising monarchs.

“We are finally here and what a time! With a king of the Beilschmidt line and a queen of Romulus line,” Francis announced, with high pride, expanded arms that Ludwig was afraid he would use to hug them both and he really did not need that from him.

“I really hope what we can do is enough,” Lili worried.

Vash and her were still new to the usage of their powers, something that had to do mostly with their young age, but it was just how things were done in the Diamond Kingdom and how it coincided with the refreshing energy of this boundary in the Club Kingdom. The siblings had read the spells the night before enough times, and although nervous, they still kept easy breaths to not keep the others concerned.

“You will do fine,” Feliciano told them, with a confident smile and a proud standing.

Yes, yes they would.

“All right, I shall get the orbs then.” Francis went ahead and picked them up from a standing chest, all three empty glasses shinning as the ones Feliciano and Ludwig had to fill back in Berlin.

Francis handed each one, remaining with his own, smiling despite the tension that surrounded. “Vash, why don’t you begin?” He suggested.

Vash stiffed, but ended up nodding, moving ahead, taking place in a tiled design on their floors. It was a starry night…just as the one in Berlin, Feliciano noticed. Sure, the colors were different, the stars shone in different angles and lines, but it was the same concept, the same story, the same night. Feliciano could have wondered more about it if he hadn’t been distracted by Vash beginning the spell.

A strong hold, a twirling movement in his hands, color beginning to alight in the orb, filling, glowing in Vash’s eyes, a slight rising from the floor, and then out of nowhere, gone, he was wobbling back on the floor, trying to keep his standing, Lili offering her help while he tried to rub out the pain in his head. His sphere was a bumblebee yellow, solid, more like a paint ball that was ready to throw in a childhood game.

Francis then decided that it should be his turn, hoping he could control his outward appearance well and not look like some magical hazard, but that was not possible. As quickly as he bonded himself to the orb to begin its magic giving, his hands moved on by themselves, filling in its yellow, in its white, his hair moved everywhere in a mess, he floated, his eyes alighted, halted to the power and what the orb wanted. When it was done, he stumbled down on the floor like the rest, trying to smooth his hair, his clothes, wondering if perhaps he could use some forgetting spell so they wouldn’t remember how messed he turned for this. His own orb shone quite beautifully, in a glittery daffodil with white ribbons that fell in designed curves. Francis was rather proud of it and they all truthfully admired it. Sure, it was nice, but none had been as beautiful and as rare as Feliciano’s.

With it being Lili’s turn now, and being a Queen (if even an arising one), Ludwig hoped to see something similar and that it was just something that all Queens did. She took the longest to prepare, easing breaths, trying to relax and remain with her Queenly aura. The magic that arose from her was more controlled than the other two, one that left her still even as she rose, even as the energy poured into the orb, as her silhouette glowed for her closed eyes, falling just as still as it settled, only then did she open her eyes with pain, rubbing it away just as Vash had done. No…she didn’t go through the same thing Feliciano had done, she hadn’t shone that much, didn’t glow to a blinding, or revealed weird symbols, wings and halos on her body. Her sphere, although beautiful, was a simplistic glittering cream, no gold, no other colors, no rarity, just another Sphere of Validity. Well…there were still two other Queens left that had a chance of showing something different, but for now, all the Spheres were done and presented towards Ludwig. He nodded, moving before him his staff. He took a position, turned and held it just in the places his grandfather had taught him. With a slight of his own magic, he brought it to the staff, and the Spheres disappeared from the hold of the Diamond monarchs, taking their places in the handle with the others from the Heart Kingdom.

Three reds, three yellows, six dark sockets and two kingdoms to go.

“Ah, finally!” Francis clapped, proud of the conclusion.

“I believe, since our purpose here is done, Feliciano and I should be taking our leave,” Ludwig wanted to postpone.

“Oh no, no, no, the carriage is not set to depart till the late hours of the night,” Francis wanted to ease.

“It’s all according to the newly planned route, by your suggestion, we avoided big cities and common roads,” Lili filled in.

“We’re confident that you will have no such meeting with Khaos’s men as you started,” Vash assured.

“Is it still really necessary to wait for this carriage so late?” Ludwig still wanted to hope.

“It is. We avoid common hours they attack, as well as alerting a big city like Paris. In the excitement, crowds could spread the news and unknowingly lead it to the wrong ears,” Vash said.

“So please, enjoy what’s left of the day with us,” Francis settled.

“Then, I want to spend it checking these new routes you planned, I don’t want to be left with any surprises and I need to make sure it’s appropriate for the both of us.”

They had to cede him the chance. They bowed and agreed, ushering to follow them out to the room where they had planned this. Ludwig went on ahead without a glance to Feliciano, simply expecting him to follow behind.

Feliciano sighed…he shouldn’t be surprised about this, it should have been obvious that it was to happen. Although Ludwig still insisted to do things together, he kept his distance this time, barely making eye contact, all a result, all a way of him trying to push it away. Maybe he shouldn’t have done what he did last night, maybe he really should have moved away, maybe Ludwig’s reaction was just pity, a small moment of granting kindness. Pookie nuzzled into his cheek sensing this coming dread, hoping he could replace it with his caring. Feliciano giggled, petting the little St. Mark, distracted in him as he followed behind the rest through the halls.

“It was something at least. Hopefully there’s still time in the trip to change this and learn some more,” he whispered with hope, and the little lion seemed to wink in confidence.

Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

I managed some time with a strike going on in my university. Hope you enjoy!

There was a spread of islands between the Diamond and Spade Kingdom called the Oralee. Some of these belonged to the Diamond Kingdom, others to Spades. They were so many it was pretty easy to lose yourself between them if you didn't have a good map or a clear direction planned for you, as it was in Ludwig and Feliciano's case. Usually, most Kings and Queens that did this journey would take a boat from Paris that landed them in London, from which they would then take a train to Washington. That was what Khaos's men expected, especially when that boat ride was several days long, making it easier to take control and harder for Ludwig and Feliciano to establish contact if something did happen. Passage through the Oralee islands meant having to take a carriage, walking, camping, contacting natives, taking several boat rides, passing and stopping in different kinds of islands. Complicated but sure to lose anybody who would tried to chase them. It would be longer of course, it meant entrance through the Hindu province instead of the English province, but it was their best chance and Ludwig was determined to make their thread as short and quick as possible.

He had Feliciano and him punctual to their carriage arrival, even helping the servants in placing their things while Feliciano worked on wishing goodbyes to the Diamond monarchs.

"Safe travels, don't forget to message," Francis wished them, embracing Feliciano and giving loving caresses on his back. Ludwig wished his own in bows and handshakes, only to Lili did he actually give an embrace.

The carriage door was shut, the horses were given the signal, and they were off, Feliciano never stopping his waving to the three until they gave a turn and were gone from his vision. By orders to keep their departure well hidden, curtains were drawn back, leaving Ludwig and Feliciano to the interior of the coach, only but a single lamp on the wall to light only their presence. Maybe they could speak, maybe Feliciano could mention- when he glanced towards Ludwig, he was already turning to his wall, back to him, trying to make himself comfortable on his side of the coach to rest. The horses were going to go on for the rest of the night, the best they could do for now was sleep, they would need the energy for all the walking that was expectant of them the next day.

So much for a chat, Feliciano sighed.

He let Pookie lay on his lap and he petted him for as long as he could in his sleep, making himself just as comfortable in his own side.

In the morning, they had a breakfast of bread, cheese, tomatoes and a delicious cherry drink, all which Francis had saved for them for this carriage trip. It was silent, with an occasional compliment or an asking for little bags of jam and chocolate that they shared between each other. Even when they were done, they settled their attention on the views the now opened curtains showed to them. The city was far behind them and they had the beauty of the French province countryside for them. Yellow flowers, white cobbled villages, hills of gold, the blue of the sky, of the rivers, of the lakes, completing, inspiring Feliciano to sketch, beautiful things that Ludwig could not ignore, peeking by the sides, each time moving closer, hoping for a better look. Too close he had reached that when Feliciano turned to him, their faces lay close enough for them to feel their breaths against their skin. Ludwig instantly went back to his corner, looking on, pretending like it wasn't that obvious that he had been starring at Feliciano's sketches. Feliciano found it rather adorable, chuckling, smiling to him even if he didn't dare glance back. He continued on with his sketch only to stop when the coach came to a final halt.

Feliciano closed the book, ready to stand and head out, but Ludwig stopped him by raising a hand, blocking his way as he came down first, inspecting well their surroundings. Yes, there was nothing else but the farmhouse, just as Francis had promised them.

"Your highness," one man had called, rushing down the gardens of his yards to reach them.

"You must be Mousier Pierre," Ludwig recognized.

"I am more than pleased to make your acquaintance." He bowed rather excessively, nervous and shaking, avoiding his eyes but also making sure that everything was presentable, including the stones that decorated the front.

"You have a very lovely home."

Ludwig turned to notice that Feliciano came down from the coach without waiting for his approval, gazing in wonder to not only the house, but its beautiful surroundings, the trees, the river, the hills, the fields. It was such a fresh and nice break from the stuffiness of the coach.

"Th-thank you, your highness." His bow this time was not as shaking, managing a true smile.

"Yes, yes it is lively, sir, now if you would kindly bring us the lunch and the items King Francis had asked for you to give us."

"Certainly." Another bow and he rushed to the gardens to get a table, a mantel to place it over, going as far as to get a vase with a beautiful sunflower, refine plates and glasses, settling lastly with a picnic basket he picked from inside the home.

Feliciano rolled his eyes, he was never going to like the excessiveness people went just to serve them. As he continued letting his eye trace the form of the house, his eyes caught shinning little yellow eyes, ginger braids, a floral dress, peeking through the door, fascinated by the presence that was basically at her doorsteps, wanting to gaze on even with a mother

trying to pull her back inside. Feliciano gave her a wave, along with a sweet smile, and the girl panicked, closing the door and finally letting herself be guided away.

“Do we have to eat alone?” Feliciano questioned.

“Francis didn’t give any specifications.” Ludwig didn’t know what Feliciano was planning.

The basket the man had brought them was a large one, Feliciano knew he would leave many things behind even with his big appetite, and he was sure Ludwig would do the same.

“Mousier, you have placed everything so well. There’s more than enough food and space, why don’t’ you and your family join us?” Feliciano suggested, much to the surprise of Ludwig and the man.

“I-I don’t think it would be appropriate.”

“Indeed,” Ludwig tried to stop.

“Nonsense! Please, we would really like the company, and it’s better than having your family remain in the house on a beautiful day like this. Go on, go on, tell them.” Feliciano took his seat decided.

“A-all right then.” He bowed and went back into the house with the news, the girl rushing off first, although the closer she came, the shier she turned, hesitant in her steps, her gaze strongly on Feliciano, hands behind her back.

“Hello, you have a very lovely dress today. What’s your name?” Feliciano asked as kind as ever.

“Justine,” she shyly answered with constant sways.

“A beautiful name to match! Come sit beside me and share in what your family made, it all looks delicious.” Feliciano pulled her chair like any gentleman would.

“I helped with the crêpes.” She was growing excited, jumping on her seat.

“They smell amazing, did you use lemon? It looks like it.”

She nodded ecstatically.

It was the first thing he took a bite from, and he glowed with honest delight, loving and sharing them with her.

Ludwig had taken his seat, trying to ignore this scene and its sweetness. The man’s wife then headed out, a basket with a walnut bread in her hands, alight, and Feliciano welcomed her into the table, already conversing and chatting like old friends. Ludwig grew more impressed by Feliciano’s talent to befriend anyone so easily each day, honestly wishing he could possess a gift as that, but as ever, he stayed in his seat, eyes only on the table and the crêpe he took for himself.

The man came back with drinks this time, of vanilla and almond that made an excellent touch. Along the crêpes and the walnut bread, they also had bouillabaisse and cassoulet, excellent and having Feliciano taking seconds. They laughed, they shared recipes, and after a question about diets and exercises, even Ludwig joined in, Feliciano proud that he was easing up to these kinds of people, opening and letting himself smile that wonderful form that had Feliciano's heart faltering and releasing dreamy sighs. Before he could stare on, before Ludwig could even direct a smile to his direction, Justine had asked for a stroll through the gardens of the house, Feliciano complying, wishing to know of the many yellow floras that surrounded this farm land.

There were roses, tulips, dahlias, peonies, and many more that Feliciano couldn't name. They picked and picked, throwing petals to run by, not minding at all as they dropped on their clothing. They placed on their hair, in the right spots not to fall as they continued to explore. Sadly Feliciano had a duty he needed to return to.

He spotted as the couple now handed Ludwig some other items: maps, tents, hiking materials, a large basket of food and water, even a wagon to carry it all well along with the trunks and bags they still had mounted in the coach. He apologized to Justine and hurried off to help Ludwig with getting their things down from the coach and handing the horses to the Blanc family. Feliciano petted and thanked them for the service they offered in their journey. Time was upon them to leave the house, the continuing winding road into the woods looking haunting and aggravating to Feliciano as he starred on.

"Best of luck," the woman wished.

"As his majesty, King Francis said, continue on the paved road until it ends, only then will you follow the symbols on the map, through the swamp until you meet with a Michelle Mancham, who will lead you well through the rest of the Oralee islands."

Both Ludwig and Feliciano nodded, understanding well, grasping their things, pointing the direction to leave. Feliciano gave one last kiss and embrace to Justine, and with a willing and finished gaze to Ludwig, both started on their walking.

Ludwig offered to pull the wagon, insisting that Feliciano just carried some of the bags on his back to ease the weight and to not make it twinge so harshly. The Blanc family stayed watching them, waving and shouting suggestions until light seemed to vanish them, now nothing but growing trees, darkened yellow woods and this mysterious road.

They continued their thread for the rest of the day, Ludwig not allowing stops, only drinks while their feet kept on moving. Feliciano, by the darkening of the sky, by the rising of the moon, was exhausted, tempted to slump over any tree if Ludwig hadn't kept glaring at him to go on.

Finally the road came to a stop, hazing into grass, nothing else to give them a clue, only a lot of clustered trees that didn't seem to give any kind of opening or welcoming into something else. Ludwig knew the map talked about this, but the faint light from the lamp was not enough to see, plus to be honest he was getting tired and he knew Feliciano was swinging ready to take any soft ground as his resting spot.

“We’ll make camp here,” Ludwig declared finally letting go of the handle to the wagon, picking the bag with the tent and starting to prepare. He handed the fire materials to Feliciano, along with the basket of food, entrusting him with their dinner. Feliciano always managed to get a new sense of waking whenever food was involved, instantly setting to work.

Ludwig was done and Feliciano finished along, the smell coming from the pot appetizing and pulling Ludwig in, to sit right beside Feliciano, just as he poured a bowl of the soup and handed it to him, with a serving smile that Ludwig found himself reciprocating with his own. A little faint red on their cheeks and they turned away, Feliciano focusing on his own bowl serving and eating.

Even though they weren’t camping at a dessert this time, the same loneliness reigned, even with the chirping, the rustling of different small animals or what the faint breeze moved. They didn’t help either by remaining silent, even as they finished their bowls, gazes lost between the darkness of trees, hoping for something exciting to come between and alight their night. Pookie’s transformation seemed to be enough, a glowing, growing and growing until he was in his normal lion size, creating a sort of resting place right behind Feliciano. Of course he had been startled, this was only the second time Pookie transformed like this on their journey, but his fur was still a comfortable one, growing inward and out as it breathed in its rest, his wings working as a good shield over its master. Feliciano found himself easing, finding the best position, thinking of just resting here for the night. Ludwig was not going to allow it, who watched impressed at the change and couldn’t remove his eyes. Pookie was indeed majestic and it was still hard to see how it was possible that the Aces decided to send him to mere arising monarchs. He sighs, a part of him thinking that perhaps it was just something else that they still had to continue to guess and realize. That’s when he remembered.

He grabbed his bag and went straight for the book, searching for the pages he had marked, going over them, still thinking if it really was safe to start. Feliciano’s power surely hadn’t dwindled, his own could not compete even with his early training. If something did happen, he only had a pamphlet of healing spells…but what if the damage was worst?

He shut the thoughts from his head. They had to start somehow. It was inevitable in their positions and he couldn’t let it wait any longer.

“Don’t get so comfortable, we’re not done yet,” he warned, noticing that Feliciano was lolling himself ever deeper into Pookie’s now large embrace. He jolted as soon as he heard the kind of tone Ludwig held, ready to hear…whatever it was that they were supposed to finish…what was it? Ludwig didn’t say, he was reading from the book still, and he really didn’t face him until he brought it to a slight close, maintaining a finger to keep a hold of the page.

“What is it that we’re not done with?” Feliciano questioned.

“Power training,” Ludwig quickly explained, standing and joining Feliciano by his side, taking his own recline over Pookie, the St. Mark didn’t seem to mind. “We need to start learning how to properly mend our power and magic.”

“But you threatened me to never use my power around-”

“Things are different this time.” He quickly opened the book, placing one side on Feliciano’s lap, the other on his own, giving them a deeper closeness, a feeling of relieving, for it was just like this how they used to get together whenever they were to read or watch art books in their childhood.

“We’ll start with a wind spell. Less likely we can get hurt and one of the simplest. I’ve already taught myself how to do this, but you have to learn it yourself as well.” He pointed to the paragraph where it was mentioned, along with diagrams that explained the certain movements and figures one should hold in their hands.

“Oh, this is an Adino,” Feliciano recognized.

“Your instructors taught you this then?”

“No, but they did mention and told me some basics on how to start.”

“Do you think you can do it by yourself?”

“Um…maybe if I finish reading this.” He took the book to better see, getting the rest of the completion he hadn’t been told. It seemed simple enough, he had confidence to try it out.

“Okay,” he breathed, he clapped his hands, concentrated, placed his palm before him, closing his eyes and focusing on his inner magic, reaching the parts that better dealt with air, releasing it out as it should… but sadly it exploded in a torrent of wind upward that shook the trees around them, had birds flying, Pookie, Ludwig and Feliciano’s hairs raising in peaks. They looked ridiculous, and Feliciano couldn’t help but laugh.

“Let’s try again, this time concentrate on lessening. This is supposed to be a simple whirlwind on the palm of your hand, Feliciano,” Ludwig scolded, working to stabilize his hair and helping Pookie who was in the same predicament.

Ludwig needed to distract himself, afraid that he would end up laughing as well.

“Okay, okay.” Feliciano decided to go right to it after he settled his own curls. He ordered himself once again to that concentration, only extending his arm once the power began its release. A powerful rush of wind came out again, but it was only slight, one that blew around them like any normal strong breeze. It was still not the spell.

“Again,” Ludwig commanded.

A deep breath, Feliciano focusing even stronger on something small. He went at it once again, arm extending and finally a whirlwind circulated in his hold, a large one that if Feliciano let it grow any bigger it could turn into a tornado.

“You’re doing well, you just need to dwindle it,” Ludwig advised, noticing that at least Feliciano was doing it as the book said, just not the right size.

While it still continued to spin, Feliciano gave a new concentration, settling his gaze and mind until he managed to lessen and lessen it and it was but a mere little thing that Feliciano could twist and turn however he wanted without blowing anything to another part of the woods.

“Excellent,” Ludwig complimented. “Is it hard for you to maintain it like this?”

“A little. It’s just sometimes hard to control any of my large releases. Even as I do this I feel tempted to make it bigger.”

“Don’t, keep it at this very intensity. You have to learn to do little things as this, it helps you better with control and patience with your own power.” As he said this, Ludwig took his own breath, extending his hand just as Feliciano, ready to start. He created his own whirlwind simply, with no wrong doings or mistakes in his first try, mostly because he did enough practice back in Paris.

“Now we’re going to mend, the most basics of spells. I doubt we can hurt ourselves with this, but Feliciano, I need you to focus, I need you with this same intensity and control, any higher and you can release something that I won’t be able to take,” he advised strongly and Feliciano nodded although hesitant, but he did keep that focus, on the spin, on the small coolness in his palm, watching as Ludwig’s hand reached close to his own, the wind intensifying, close to colliding, but not just yet.

“Breathe…” Ludwig commanded, in a whisper as calming as the very breeze they concocted, one Feliciano could trust himself to do just as he ordered. “Now…I want you to look into my eyes as we do this.”

Feliciano flushed, turned away, not sure if he could be strong enough to look into those eyes and not expect a wanting, a desire, surely something that could disrupt whatever magic they were trying to create together. It was a nervousness Ludwig easily saw, but he confused the feelings for something he thought he could easily convince him to settle.

“I’m not going to do anything to you, it’s just a better way of concentrating, of letting our magic flow with more ease,” he tried to convince, but Feliciano was still tentative, biting his lips, telling himself to just hold down any passion, any need, just magic, just only think about magic.

Thinking it could better help Feliciano, Ludwig moved closer, an arm behind him, replacing the leaning of Pookie, near enough to lay his forehead upon his if he wanted. With a gulp, Feliciano finally raised his head up, instantly locking with that deep blue, nothing but them, his expression, in the slight alighting that confirmed the beginning of magical passing between them. Their hands moved involuntarily closer, the wind there beginning to unite as their gazes, beginning their intertwining, the slight breeze that blew upward, one they created together. Closer and closer their faces inched, just as both their whirlwinds began their collide, their official mending decreed in the intense glow of their eyes, now lost in each other, and no matter what Feliciano had done to hold his emotions from this, there was something of pleasure mixed into it. To their surprise, Feliciano still maintained with that small release, their magic settling until together, in the hold of their hands, they created a larger whirlwind, fueled only with their united magic.

To be honest, neither cared over such a petty trick, their eyes were too beautiful to withstand, the feeling a heightening that they enjoyed, that they wished they could have more of, that they could truly let themselves dive in.

It was euphoric, powerful, both almost moaned to it.

The whirlwind began to grow in their carelessness, threatening. It was only when they spotted it at the edge of their eyes did they instantly stopped by letting go, letting it disappear in a rush through the camp and area, to join along with the rest of the winds of the woods, but it didn't severe the connection they still had in their eyes.

There was no magic this time, it was not controlling their closeness, how their foreheads rested upon each other, how they could feel clearly their breaths against their lips, how Ludwig raised his free hand at the back of Feliciano's neck, feeling the softness of his brown hair, threaded like curled silk between his fingers. Feliciano's breath hitched, eyes began to seal, feeling as Ludwig neared, as he turned, as he readied, leaving expectations of a different kind of magic to occur between them.

Feliciano wanted that kiss, never had he thought there would come a moment in which he would desire it so much. The last time they shared in one, even if nine years ago, even as mere ten-year-olds, when their lips touched like that, there came an intense burning that spread through their bodies in raging sparks, alighting like new coming stars in a night sky, but still with gentility, softness, and simply one of the most elated feelings Feliciano had ever gone through in his life.

What he would do to go through it again, to meet their lips like that once again, to let release a promise of something strong still flaring inside them. But it halted, just like always, a reminder always reached Ludwig's mind on time, which lessened his hold, which had him moving back, with a defeated sigh, regret heavy even in the way he stood, keeping his gaze distant, away from letting any of the lingering continue, from having Feliciano dream and believe in something that he just couldn't let it be alive between them.

"Ludwig…" Feliciano tried to call, reaching a hand that he hoped was enough to pull him back, still wanting a chance.

"Sleep, we have to make it through the swamp tomorrow." Without a care he turned away, into the tent, surely taking immediate sleep on his way to forgetting and annulling. No other rustling, no other movement, all lights inside the tent hushed, Ludwig went to sleep and there was no way of getting that moment back.

Feliciano heavily sighed, falling down into Pookie's fur with obvious hurt, cuddling and embracing himself, trying not to let it affect him so much, but it did, tears edged at his eyes and he shivered as he felt the cold around him more intensely. Pookie turned to him, saddened to see him like this, wishing he could say, that he could explain, but all he could do was lean and comfort him with his own nuzzling, moving to give him more comfort, letting his wings embrace him like blankets to warm him. Pookie only wished it could also protect him from any kind of sadness, from one that was so repetitive from Ludwig.

Feliciano kept thinking that there was a chance with each new brink they met, that he could give a push that would make him his, make him show those feelings that he knew were locked inside him, but as always, Ludwig moved back before he could give that leap. The pain should have numbed by now, it should be something he was used to, but as always, the pain that rang across him was clear, feeling a new kind of betrayal each time.

His hand somehow made its way to one of his pockets, taking out the little musical chest, opening with the relaxing music, one he could focus on as he took his rest with Pookie, with the shelter of his wings, eyes closing and trying to think of only the song, only the song.

It was a melody Ludwig tried to focus on from the secureness of the tent, clear to him even with its distance, haunting him, scolding for what he did, for what he almost let happen. He couldn't believe he was letting himself fall so easily. Did he have to continue to repeat the images in his head, torturing him into the bleakness he had to settle to survive this? Didn't he already know what could happen to Feliciano, what was meant to happen to him?

He was getting weak, with beg, with want for an escape from this. He wanted that chance that he tossed away as heartless as he learned to be, send it all to hell and run over there to show Feliciano exactly what it was he felt for him in every detail.

No, no, no, no, he groaned, he gripped harshly to his sheets and mat. He couldn't be so selfish, he couldn't let Feliciano reach completely the grasp of his heart. This was for him, it was all for him, and hopefully afterwards he would understand.

The last time he felt this desire to cry was when he had first received the letter that changed the course of how his life was meant to go, but he pierced the inclination in whatever physical pain he could to not let himself succumb to such weakness.

The music, the still playing music, think of lullabies, think of children running in fields, Feliciano and him running in those fields, daydreaming a future in which the circumstances could have been different, one in which he could have been with him as he truly wanted.

Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

> Welp, my university went on an indefinite strike…idk when I'm coming back, but at least it gives me a lot of time to write. Hope you enjoy this chapter!

Ludwig wakes him up early, just as soon as the sun edges in the horizon. Silent, in avoiding glances, they pack everything. Feliciano prepares them a breakfast consisting mostly of fruits, and as soon as everything is set, they start making way. Pookie by now returned to his small self, switching places with Feliciano's shoulder, his head, or on the top of the wagon, watching their things and making sure nothing falls off or disappears.

The terrain becomes harder to traverse with the wagon as they begin their entering into the swamp, as the ground mushes under their feet, as they try to find ways to pass through small openings where tree roots entangle elegantly in. Many times Feliciano was tempted to stop and sketch all of this, but Ludwig kept pestering them on to continue, eyes heavy settled on the map, a pen in hand as he marked the places they already met, were currently trying to find and establishing their route. So far they were doing well, meeting up with everything as they should, now if only it could be easier to bring their wagon across.

Currently they were trying to get over a large root, well mostly Feliciano, Ludwig had passed it easily as well as brought the wagon well to his side. It was a tall one, Feliciano kept bouncing and trying to grasp enough to pass, but it was becoming futile and Ludwig was loosening his patience, rolling his eyes and giving exasperated sighs as he waited on the other side. Finally, Feliciano gave one push that had him standing, with promise of jumping easily to the continuing route, but in one movement he slipped, a heavy danger of hitting his head to unconsciousness or even breaking a leg, but luckily Ludwig had grasped a tight hold of his hand before that could happen, pulling him to stand on his secure grounds.

"Thank you," Feliciano told him, trying to ease the hand away, but Ludwig ended up keeping it, harsh no matter the pull Feliciano tried to take. It was needed, they had to keep bouncing puddles, growing brooks, sinking ground, even hills and intimidating tree roots, and the grasp of their hands kept a hold that had them moving together in simplicity.

The map told them at a point that they finally reached a stretch that they just had to continue straight, a ground that was strong and dry with no dangers or obstacles to be presented for at least a half an hour walk. Even so, as they continued on with quite the gentility, side by side with no words or glances to each other, the only thing that kept them together was that still hold, grasping and in no way something that they could just ignore no matter the distractions of the swamp around them. Yes, Feliciano admitted that this hold was dear, one that seemed to pass him strength, soft and loving even with the hardened grip, but what was the point if there wouldn't be any meaning, if Ludwig was just going to pull him away and direct his

gaze forward and give no explanations to what he just did. Feliciano agreed that he shouldn't submit himself to this any longer, pull away just as he would do, uncaring and nonchalant, both his hands meeting in his own grasp, trying to cover well under the dark Heartian cloak he wore to cover himself from the cold air that was arising in this area.

"Why do you have to keep doing this?" Feliciano practically scolded, looking away with an intensity of hurt, not wanting Ludwig to see it.

Ludwig griped the air as if trying to pull his hold back, but when all he received was the air, he decided to keep his own hands hanging under his own cloak. Why was he so disappointed anyways? Feliciano did the right thing by letting go, by keeping this distance, as he was supposed to and should by his own personal duty.

"It's just a way to help you keep leveling here, Feliciano."

"I'm not talking about that!" He suddenly shouted, echoing in the expanses, in his power silencing everything until anything else they had to say between each other could be heard clear. "Why do you keep…showing me that there…might be something, that you do…care for me, and then…always push me away, forget everything and pretend it didn't happen. I-I'm sick of it! I just wish you could be clearer about this, I wish you could truly be honest with your feelings for me and that you would stick with it, and not be so harsh about it the next day." He shivered, wishing he could hide himself more in the cloak, and Ludwig feared he was tearing, ones he tried to wash away with the fabric of the robe. Ludwig only sighed, heartbreakingly leaving them in silence for the continuation of that walk. Feliciano felt like hitting his back, wanting to shout insults of betrayal and move ahead of him, not caring if he would get lost or separate from him.

It was in moments like these that made him miss Berlin, where he had his own space and privacy to run away from him as he wished whenever these things happened, even if they did share a room and had to work in a lot of things together.

"I already told you…I can't tell you, and these are just…escapes of what I…truly wish I was able to do more often with you." Ludwig remained with his gaze still as forward, but even as he wasn't seeing, he could feel Feliciano's eyes burning into his back, still questioning and hoping, but yet a faint blush to what he did reveal. "But I cannot let them impose so often. I have a duty that I need to uphold and I can't let myself get distracted, you should be doing the same…this is not meant to be enjoyed, this a journey to keep all the kingdoms safe and we can't keep letting our feelings come between that."

"But we need them," Feliciano interrupted him, wishing he could say more, that he could convince, but Ludwig seemed to move further ahead, keeping that very distance from even his words, but close enough to keep watch and not let them drift away. "Were'nt you so adamant about getting married? And doesn't the kingdom need our relationship strong to prosper? Then why can't we give this journey the chance to fix things as well. I did tell you that I would give you chance if you changed. Ludwig…" The way he said his name, it was almost like it stilled him to his control. "I know you have to…hold something dear to me…I know a part of you still holds our promises, it shows in the way you keep letting these moments escape." Ludwig eyes froze as if he had caught him red handed.

No matter what he did, he hated it was this obvious, that Feliciano could face him about it, reminding him of how much he was failing and betraying his goal. He wished he could shut any other words, pretend like he wasn't hearing this, but alone in a swamp with nothing else but their voices, Ludwig couldn't easily escape from this.

"Yes, we do have an important duty to fulfill in this trip, but give it its opportunity to fulfill the duty between us as well. I really want us to have something strong, new and different from that of our childhood. I really want us to be the King and Queen our kingdom can look up to and remember. I know…I know you have the potential, please, just give up to everything and…be with me, let this all loose and forget about the tight responsibilities." He wished he could reach his hand to grasp him, to really let the words sink into him. "Whatever it is you're trying to hide, it can't be that bad as to not-"

"It is," Ludwig suddenly imposed, somehow angry about all this, a tone harsh and colliding between the trees and even resounding in the water. "It really is, and I don't need you telling me how is it that I'm supposed to deal with this when you don't understand. Don't…don't try to change my mind, I'm doing this for-" you, for you, "-my own personal reasons and you should keep your head focus on simply reaching our destinations as we should currently. I'm sorry if I am this way, that I hurt you…that I hurt myself. I will try to keep things in the clear as it should be. Believe it or not, it pains me to know I cause you this and…the last I want is to see you hurt…no matter…how much I've already done so." But in the end, there would be meaning, and Feliciano would be grateful.

To this, Feliciano rolled his eyes, it only made him more lost. He was still unsure, it was still unclear, but he got these words from him and somewhat they were enough for now.

They continued on, in the distance watching as the ground moisten, more roots, more obstacles with water that would soon come their way and make their hiking much harder.

"…can I still know?" Feliciano dared ask.

"No." Without space to even think about it, Ludwig turned to him, just as they reached a reclining bank, nothing but muggy water separating them from continuing. Ludwig offered his hand for Feliciano to take, for that continuing help they needed to go on forward. "Whatever it is, Feliciano, don't think about it and just… enjoy from whatever times I let myself be free to you. I admit they're…meaningful and keep…fresh hope in my mind and heart. I ask that you are patient with me sometimes and that…you always learn to forgive." He hoped this hint was enough, and part of Ludwig was desperate that he got the hidden message, the call that shouted for Feliciano to know, to reveal. Feliciano didn't receive it, he remained skeptical, eyes heavy on the offered hand wondering if he should really accept this, keep with these holds, these games, and hopefully in the future… maybe there was a chance that Ludwig just hadn't seen yet. Damn the fact that he indeed was a forgiving person, one that was willing to give Ludwig the continuing hope of revealing, of enjoying, until finally they could live a promised love. Feliciano was determined to show him, to convince him, and with accepting this hold, letting himself be driven close to him, like Ludwig had his goal, Feliciano grew his very own, and that was to make Ludwig understand that no matter what was holding him, there was a way he could still defeat it so their love could reign more.

Ludwig used a solidifying spell on the water, creating a simple glass walk mostly for the wagon. He pulled Feliciano so he could ride his back, keeping an impressive hold on both his arising Queen and the wagon as he traversed. The weight meant nothing, not when Feliciano was nuzzled on his shoulder, soft and caressing, hands occasionally tracing as a way to calm, and it worked. There was no faltering to his spell and to his hold as he walked on.

Later they found another bank, Ludwig could stop his spell, he could let Feliciano on the ground once again, easy ground, hands held for if anything tricked them, no matter how calming the rest of their threading for the day went on. They found a spot to rest for the night, both having to come inside the tent to sleep after dinner since Pookie this time didn't want to transform. It was cold, especially after having rain fall down during the night, both having to take out heavier blankets that they had thought they would only use for Clubs.

The rain brought a heavy mist in the morning, one that was hard for them to work with as they dismounted the tent and ate their breakfast. Despite it, they had to continue on, Feliciano wanting a turn in following the map. Ludwig let him and he did a pretty good job, finding the landmarks, the routes and marking as he had done the last two days. He could relax trusting that he wouldn't get them lost.

At one point, the mist became too heavy, the trees seemed to darken in fearsome intensity, startling them whenever they were surprised with one the foggy air had hidden to their proximity. It was becoming harder and harder to notice their steps, the surroundings blurring into white, leaving no chance for Feliciano to spot a mark. Ludwig raised a lamp to try and help, but it did nothing, they were stuck, and if they moved any further, there was the danger of losing themselves from the trail.

"What should we do?" Feliciano asked.

Ludwig gazed around, finding nothing, absolutely nothing to give him an idea. "I think we should stay put and hope this clears soon," was all he could suggest for now.

They let the minutes pass but the mist only seemed to intensify, Feliciano having to reach and take a good hold of Ludwig's arms so he wouldn't lose him. They brought each other closer, especially when their ears caught sudden rustling. Feliciano instantly panicked, driving himself to Ludwig's chest and having his arms wrap around him. Ludwig didn't mind it, he wrapped his own arms around his small figure, attentive to anything that could arise, now when the rustling got intense, nearing. They were already thinking the worst, Khaos's men, bandits, pirates, taking an opportune moment from the fact that they were alone, with no sight, no clue as to what anybody could do to them. The rustling then joined with sounds of tapping, a whoosh that neared to them, surely coming to the only presence alighted by the lamp still in Ludwig's grasp.

"Hold it," Ludwig whispered to Feliciano, and he did, with both his hands, shaking along with his own nervousness, trying to hide the light along with himself in the protectiveness of Ludwig's arms.

Ludwig took a look to one of the trunks in the wagon, it was at the bottom, he couldn't get a weapon in time, which meant having to deal with magic. He focused, prepared an intense burning fire spell, his arm ready to aim, eyes trying to catch any movement, any silhouette.

Only the tapping and the rustling continued, Feliciano closing his eyes and burying them into Ludwig's chest.

Silence…and then…a large bending pole pierced right to the ground before them, a shooting sound that had them both jumping, even a little scream from Feliciano. Ludwig instantly took his aim to destroy the pole before anything could reach them, the fire in his hand growing and burning intensely to light up the area in red, only seeking destruction and protection for Feliciano.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, hold it!" A shout came, a feminine voice, finally sliding to the end of the pole to stand before the arising monarchs. She wore a simple robe, marked with a mix of Diamond and Spade symbols, the only thing tying it together being some sashes and other materials that gave it more form, matching well with the dark skinned girl, young, a teenager, curly hair tied in two pony tails with clear blue ribbons. She was quite the eccentric person to meet on a misty day at a swamp.

"Pardon, your highness," she bowed, with practice reverence and one Ludwig and Feliciano returned, their fear beginning to slip away, sensing no kind of danger from this young girl. "Michelle Mancham! I believe his majesty, King Francis, told you two about myself." Ah yes, he did, and what a relief it was to finally meet her.

Feliciano didn't fear this mist anymore, this loneliness, he could move apart from Ludwig's hold, smiling with friendly gleam to this girl. "Francis didn't tell us you would be so beautiful," he instantly complimented, much to Ludwig's nuisance.

The girl chuckled, a faint blush, bowing once again in thanks. "You are quite the charm yourself, your highness." It was Feliciano's turn to blush and giggle, while Ludwig remained as stoic, uncaring.

"You have almost reached the end of the swamp alone, a great feet to those of the area, but from now you will have my help. Were only an hour's walk away to our next destination." She pointed excitedly to the distance, like the mist was not there giving them a sense of dread still.

"Um…" Feliciano wanted to question how exactly she was planning on getting them ahead when nothing could be seen.

"Just follow me and do exactly as I do." She took a hold of the pole, which instantly left its bend, shortening until it was but a simple stick which she could twirl and move however she wished. With knowing steps, she dived into the mist, finding the tree she was looking for. With magic, a few movements, the pole grew, taking its rest upon the tree, growing high to reach the branches, steps growing to its side to make it the more easier. Michelle then took out a wand, wood like it was taken from any of the dying trees, mended with jewels and bands to give it a more unique touch for herself. She swung with knowing practice, a composing music that gave the wagon vivacity, flowing it along to join in whatever altitude the pole reached. Ludwig and Feliciano still couldn't see it, the mist was still too heavy, it was almost like she made their stuff disappear.

“Come along now.” And she went up, into nothingness, with smiles, liveliness and nothing to fear, while Ludwig and Feliciano remained on the ground still pensive as to what they were supposed to do.

“Guys…really, we’re on a tight schedule here,” she ushered from the top and Feliciano finally headed by taking his own steps, trying, feeling the balance sure before he made his way up, followed quickly by Ludwig.

It really didn’t go as high as they thought, it made them reach a platform, to the top of the swamp were things became much clearer, the mist rolling under them as they took this safe grounding. This wasn’t the only platform, long suspended bridges connected several of them, some small, some large as to even hold little cabin houses, all around them in a well-built network. It was incredible how a sudden mist like this was enough to hide this entire structure.

“Hey!” They heard Michelle call, waving and already standing from a far off platform, in her grasp the wagon with their stuff, pointing to the first long bridge they needed to traverse.

Ludwig and Feliciano went annoyingly slow, still unsure, new to this and what could occur, but once they realized that the bridges were safe, that Michelle could see more confidence in them…she began to run.

“Come on! Come on! Come on!” They had no other choice but to join her pace, running along behind her, through various bridges, all kinds of platforms, but Michelle refused to give them any kind of stop or rest. Pookie seemed to chuckle at them from his comfortable position still at the top of the wagon, no matter how harshly Michelle moved it. At one point she left it for it to be returned to Ludwig’s hold, stepping aside and taking out her pole, letting it grow, piercing it to the grounds, then swinging herself with it deeper into the mist. Ludwig and Feliciano remained still watching, impressed and wondered.

“Don’t just stand around! Go on!” She kept on quickening, bouncing along through the dying mist, clearer for them to see in the distance and follow.

She kept them forward, moving at such paces throughout the whole day, only stopping when they got too fatigue, having to hydrate, rest their bodies to start again in the coming minutes. The day darkened with the three still on their feat, one that Feliciano was sure he would faint and fall to, into the ground beneath these walkthroughs and give up to total exhaustion. His vision was fading, his feet were faltering, he slumped more and more, and he swore it was magic that was keeping him moving. Everything just seemed so lost that he didn’t notice as they came to a verge, one where fresh air joined, blowing apart his hair, a new color, a new sky.

“Feliciano!” Ludwig called, bringing him into his arms before he leaped into the drop that landed into the rocky shore, intimidating waves crashing anything in its approach. It was the spray that awoke Feliciano enough to realize that there was no mist anymore, the trees surrounding them not that of a swamp but of a forest. Before them was the vast ocean, in the distance peaks that blended well with the darkness of the sky. Feliciano looked up to see a beautiful starry night, gleaming with promise, with victory to their passing through the swamp and welcoming to the new phase. Michelle, after one last swing from her pole, she

lessened it and now stood alongside them, a breath of relief to have finally headed out and into the openings she knew and felt at home at.

“Those are the Seychelles islands, my home, the entrance to the Oralee," she pointed to the peaks in the distance.

“How are we getting over there?” Feliciano questioned, not wanting to think they had to swim.

Michelle pointed to the side and they noticed the port town, a small one, but with enough lights, action, noise, entrance and departure of boats to make it boisterous as a city should. They went down the platforms and took a well-established route, safe with presence of locals walking along, homes and shops to the sides, growing until they found themselves in the center of the town. So beautiful and quaint, friendly and scenic, it reminded Feliciano of his home village and he hoped to have more time there, but quickly Michelle lead them to the busy port, where she already got them tickets with only but an hour to wait before they had to board. Michelle led them to finally rest in the sitting of a waiting area while she offered to get them some dinner. Feliciano was about to offer to join her but she headed off before he could suggest it, having no choice but to remain there, leaving this village unexplored. He sighed, looking back, seeing that he at least had a wonderful view of it. He took out his sketchbook and did his usual, sitting close to Ludwig so he didn’t have to peek discreetly. This time he kept a watchful eye, not turning away even when Feliciano glanced to him, wanting to see his reactions whenever he added something that was given more form and detail.

“Why don’t you color them?” Ludwig questioned, after having noticed that the majority of his sketches were done in the plainness of his pencil. Not that it wasn’t bad, but he knew how well Feliciano worked with colors and how much he liked it, the shades, the gradients, the glow that made them realistic and like little portals to that moment when he first saw them in person.

“My coloring pencils were in one of the trunks we lost in the train attack,” he remembered with gloom, a deep sigh to losing them, knowing they had been good ones that he had bought himself in Berlin.

Ludwig couldn’t give him any sympathies for Michelle had returned then with food, which Feliciano devoured desperately after having skipped lunch in favor of doing all that running and moving them ahead. In between they chatted, learning that Michelle once used to live at the castle in Paris, on a sort of internship learning more about royal connections. While there she befriended Francis well, who practically treated her like a daughter, and the arising Queen Lili like a fellow sister. She visited when she could, for her time in the palace had been one she truly enjoyed and hoped to repeat. For now she focused mostly on helping foreign travelers with the passage of the Oralee, knowing all the islands well, those close and far from her own and how to lead to destinations in any part of the Spade Kingdom where the islands finished. She went on with many tales of her kinds of adventures throughout them, making them see that she was indeed well prepared to take the Heartian royals across. Any more of her stories were cut when horns announced the boarding for the boat that was to sail to the Polynesian region of the Oralee, where they would make port in the island of Samoa.

They wasted no time, taking their things, Michelle holding only a single bag which she was confident had enough; if anything she could restack in any of the islands they were to visit.

The boat was large, enough to accommodate the large groups that came, to sustain their activity, for food, for entertainment, and of course, their rooms. There were no prestige ones here, they all got the same room treatment and Feliciano was glad about that. The room Ludwig and him shared was right across Michelle's, for them to go to if they needed anything or they just had concerning questions. She suggested they took their rest immediately, in the late morning they had a particular way of setting off to their next island and they needed to have the energy for it. They headed in, the room small, but at least each had their own bed and sufficient enough space to leave their wagon. Without waiting they instantly set off to prepare themselves to sleep, washing what they could, picking their bed, trying them out, laying and surely readying their eyes for that rest.

"Do you…still want coloring pencils?" Ludwig asked, breaking for once the silence.

Feliciano was surprised, but he tried not to show it as much, wanting to give Ludwig the confidence to start out their conversations just like this more often. "Well…it's all right if I don't have them, but it be nice-…well to be honest…I really do miss dealing with colors and I really want my sketches to have more vibrancy, but maybe in Washington I'll have the chance to get some," he smiled, trying to hide the longing, but Ludwig easily saw pass it.

They could indeed wait until Washington…but- …he nodded, turning his gaze to the ceiling, settling and ready for sleep. Feliciano found his comfortable spot, releasing a delighted sigh as he sunk into it.

"Good night," he actually wished, now Ludwig's turn to be surprised, turning to him, only to see that Feliciano was already set into his sleep, eyes closed and only his breaths to give him movement in his dreams.

"Night," he still wished as well, turning and wanting his own, a little glow after those last words for the day.

Despite how small it was, it was sweet, it was releasing, a little start to how the routine of their nights could change.

Chapter 38

They arrived to Samoa a late morning as they had been promised. It was a beautiful island, one that had Feliciano wondered in delight as he stared to their approach through the room window. Tall singular mountains of green, a blue sea, white sand, a little simple town to make port, not the mess of people Ludwig and Feliciano were already used to.

As they came down, the sun shone a nice intense, one that had Ludwig and Feliciano ridding their jackets and cloaks, deciding it was best to stay in simple clothes while they were in the Oralee. It was a comfortable one, of summer, of days to spend splashing in those pristine waters. Michelle was ahead of them, serving already as their guide, Ludwig and Feliciano glad since they were indeed lost as to what they should do next.

As they headed outside the port, now into the town, Michelle spotted a figure, a familiar one that had her dashing, running, waving and crushing into the embrace of another female. They bounced and their faces were full of greetings, words catching up with the length they hadn't seen each other, all a jumble that Ludwig and Feliciano couldn't understand, easing behind them but not wanting to interrupt, even though they were already standing there pretty awkwardly.

"Oh, I have to introduce, your highness, this is Sefina Lopamaua, Samoan native and will join along with the passage," Michelle introduced in proudness, the young girl bowing in clear excitement to be working with arising royals.

"It is an honor," she said.

"Honor is ours, your island is absolutely beautiful. I hope we get to see much more," Feliciano complimented, his eyes still gazing around, finding flowers, unique buildings, houses, distanced waterfalls and even the sparkle as waves crashed against the shore.

"Thank you so much, your highness, and we will. There are many other islands were going to see that I'm sure you will enjoy as much. Come along then, we immediately have to set off." She began her leading through the town, then taking a deeper route into the forests, away from the small commotion of people and visitors, to the privacy of only them as they were the only ones on the trail.

"Hey, what about these guys. Have they arrived yet?" Michelle wondered, walking ahead to join Sefina's side.

Sefina rolled her eyes, knowing who she was talking about. "Last night actually, insisted on staying in my place and not leaving me with any ounce of sleep," she groaned and rubbed her head.

"As expected," Michelle laughed, leaving Ludwig and Feliciano in the doubt.

They were not explained anything, just to follow on, in a long thread that took them hours. Finally, by lunch time, as Feliciano's stomach could tell, they reached the edge of a flowing

river, a woodened platform, Sefina disappointed to see that there was nothing there yet.

“I can’t believe these guys,” she groans, stomping her feet, easing close to the platform, hoping to find something, just well hidden and away from her vision. Nothing, there’s nothing of what they promised they would bring by this hour. Sefina groaned loudly once again, Michelle coming to offer her a counseling pat on her shoulder.

“Well I am hungry, why don’t we make something right now while we wait?” Feliciano suggested, already picking the trunk and basket with all their ingredients and food utensils. Sefina agreed, hoping it could distract her from any more growing anger.

Feliciano made them an involtini, a plate neither of them had tried before since its availability was only in the Italian province in Hearts, but in turn, Sefina made a coconut rice of the area and Ludwig and Feliciano adored it, surprisingly making a good companion to the involtini. Michelle offered some fruits and it was a nice tranquil lunch between them…until shouting laughs joined, rustling, a large amount of tapping poles as this group made their way between the trees, in a mess of shouts among themselves. The four of them kept watchful eyes, until finally, a child, no older than thirteen, came along with a big smile, with her own pole, dressed in her own robes of blue, sashes and silver clips. Other than the pole, she also held, in a tight hold like it was a dear friend, a large canoe, with quiet the ease, jumping right over them with her own special twirls before she finally landed, throwing the canoe over to the platform by the river, lessening her pole, turning to the four with a smile and then chanting: “I won!”

“Well some of us weren’t carrying only one canoe!” This time a boy joined, older, dressed in yellows, around Michelle and Sefina’s age, with similar looks to the girl, with his own pole, carrying this time two canoes with easy strength towards the same place.

“Rosangeliz! Emmanuel! This wasn’t even supposed to be a competition in the first place!” Three last figures came, two seeming Ludwig and Feliciano’s age, one particular figure looking much older, standing surely and proud as the leader, holding the most canoes, three to be precise, while the others only held one. They all met in the same platform to place the rest of the canoes, looking like quite a mess, but the entire group was now presented, all bowing after the eldest insisted that they should before the royals in their mist.

“On behalf of my brothers and sisters, I apologize for such a rude entrance, your highness.”

“Oh it’s nothing to worry about, you all seemed like you were having fun,” Feliciano commented with his ever cheerful smile, forgiven and curious to their presence and the many canoes.

“Well now that we’re all here, does it mean we can continue ahead?” Sefina questioned to them, standing and already making her way to prepare.

“Of course, we can leave this very instant,” the eldest said, making way for her.

All worked to place the canoes on the water, some already boarded, leaving only three empty ones tied to the platform while they finished.

“Um…what are we going to do?” Feliciano asked after Michelle ushered him and Ludwig to stand up and come close.

“We’re taking these canoes to travel throughout the rest of the islands,” she explained happily, seeing no difficulties and dangers, she was surely used to traveling like this already.

“Canoes? Through the whole left of the Oralee?” Ludwig questioned, spotting at the end of the river open ocean, the next island but a far off dark peak. Was it even safe? Can these canoes take the force of the waters they would meet? The rest could tell and feel the newcomers’ unease, as expected from foreigners. Some rolled their eyes, others chuckled at such weakness showed by powerful beings.

“Don’t worry, our ancestors have traveled like this throughout the Oralee for centuries, the knowledge passed down to us and tested to make sure we are capable just as our forefathers. You are in good hands, just follow our orders and you will do fine,” one of the woman composed surely, her calming tone and expression reminiscent of a mother. She pointed to the empty canoes, marked with Heartian symbols, just for them. The youngest of the group, holding the oars, began to hand them in, even throwing Ludwig and Feliciano’s. That little girl already began paddling her canoe in the water with finesse, in zigzags, laughing, turning and twisting, clearly showing that this was art she knew well along with her brothers and sisters. To Ludwig and Feliciano, it didn’t seem like they had any other choice, so they had to accept, gazing to each other, nodding to that sureness, letting any relieving sighs escape before they began their own boarding.

The teachings they gave were little, nothing really assuring, but they wasted no time in bringing them forward, out into the open where the river ended, sun shining on them brightly, waves for now ones they could control, that let them admire the clear transparency, the green hills they left behind and the new ones that were coming ahead. The wagon was left, all their luggage tied in a protective cloak in Ludwig’s canoe. Pookie now made Feliciano’s hair his standing, looking quite fearful to all the deep waters he was surrounded with.

“You should pay attention guys, Carlos is going to explain some last things before we set off,” Michelle warned, close to them to make sure they didn’t drift apart and that they were rowing as they should.

The eldest, who they identified was this Carlos, raised his arm to catch everyone’s attention. “All right, we have to take them to the Indian province in Spades, which you all know means going through the Polynesian Region and the Caribbean Region. It’s one of the longest threads through the Oralee but the one we know the most. We will meet with a lot of open ocean like this, but a trick were going to add is entering through the rivers of different islands for quicker access and for hiding, we rather be sure to not meet any kind of threat from Khaos’s men. Are we all clear?” They all nodded, some excitedly, others with fearful trembles. “Your highness, just make sure to stay close to the group. If anything happens, we’ll be here to solve what we can.”

“Just remember the techniques we taught you,” the motherly woman said.

Like that they started, forward and onward, in laughter, in expectations and in courage. Despite how fearful Feliciano had been in the beginning, he ended falling into ease once they

passed the rivers of the first island, once he got more control of the canoes, of the waters he befriended, their waves not so intimidating anymore. It was the same for Ludwig, who quickly got the hang of it, in quickened paces to match with the rest of the group. Michelle decided on remaining in the back, striking conversation with Feliciano from time to time, which the rest would add with their own remarks, having the group laughing no matter the sudden harshness the currents would take, but it was never enough to turn them away or drift them apart.

Feliciano was enamored with the crystalline of the waters, of the different fauna they met in each of the islands, of the new animals that took rest, mixing of Diamond reign and Spades reign, of new cultures, of new people, who humbly offered them stay for the nights, in little cabin houses that made Feliciano feel like he was more at tune with the liveliness of these natures. So many nights he would try to sketch everything he saw in the day, only to be scolded by Ludwig, who wanted him to have his rest for the other rounds of rowing they would do for the next days. They were still nowhere near official lines of Spades.

One afternoon, they passed a herd of Spadian whales, clear and beautiful with markings that gave them their names, looking up to these new rowers with curiosity. Feliciano waved to them, wishing to drown them in compliments of their beauty. They would only swim by indifferent, but Feliciano couldn't hold it, he had to take out his sketchbook, stopping his rowing and letting the current move him along with the rest to capture the moment completely.

"Feliciano, pay attention ," Ludwig scolded, never leaving his sight from him.

"I am, I just really need to draw this," he still insisted.

"If you turn over or start drifting apart, don't start crying."

"Of course I will, and since you're my overly worried and protective king, I'm confident you will quickly come to save me and make sure I stay on the route even if I was painting on a canvas," he commented with a proud smile as he just finished a particular fin.

"Haha," Ludwig rolled his eyes, beginning to row forward ahead once Feliciano shut the sketchbook and went back to his rowing.

A day later, a proud flag showed their official entrance into the Spade Kingdom, still a row of islands to pass, but they were at the ends of the Caribbean region. Only three more days of sailing and they were on Indian shores. They all shouted in victory at the news, raising their oars and chanting pledges of the kingdom…well those in the group who were from the Spades side of the Oralee. After that decree they moved on ahead, through an island once again, with more wild rivers, more birds flying over them and creatures taking peeks through the woods.

"Hey, I recognize this place," Emmanuel noticed.

"Don't tell me were by the Danika River," Sefina managed to see.

"And you know what that means," Anthone smirked.

“The fish challenge!” Rosangeliz announced loudly, hollering and raising her oar in a chant. The rest began to shout in their excitement, going on with banters on who was going to win and why, recalling past wins and losses, gained advantages and how they could use it this time.

“What’s the fish challenge?” Feliciano asked, since he and Ludwig were the only ones left out of knowing.

“The Danika river is plentiful in fish of all kinds, so much that they even jump out, but it’s also one of the most challenging rivers, with falls, fast currents, even boulders and rocks that make the trek the more dangerous,” Nadia explained.

“So there’s a game!” Rosangeliz proclaimed.

“Okay, so basically-” Anthone fixed his dreadlocks more into a bun, clearly preparing himself, “-the point of the game is to catch as many fishes as possible and keep them in your canoe. The more rare the fish is, the more points you get.”

“Sounds…rather simple,” Ludwig dared comment.

“Oh no, no, no, definitely not.” Michelle was almost insulted.

“It’s like Nadia mentioned, the river is wild, it’s normal for people even with experience to lose things or even be tipped off. One of the biggest challenges is keeping the fishes inside your canoe,” Carlos continued, preparing his oar, stopping them before the entrance so they all had their chance to start fairly.

“I once had a whole pile, but one jump had them flying and I only managed to hold two in my hands,” Anthone remembered with dread.

“If I recall, that was the one I won, right?” Emmanuel wanted to remind.

“Because you used a net!”

“That was completely unfair,” Nadia agreed.

“Definitely no nets allowed this time,” Sefina added.

“Aaawww,” Rosangeliz complained, having to place her own net back to its compartment.

“Can I play?” Feliciano asked, quite excited himself.

“Feliciano,” Ludwig scolded in a growl.

“Of course! We’re always eager for new participants. Just be careful all right, like we mentioned, it gets really dangerous. Just make sure not to stay too close to the banks,” Michelle advised.

“Do you want to play too, your highness?” Nadia asked Ludwig.

“I would prefer not to.”

They all groaned.

“Come on!”

“It will be fun!”

“Yeah!”

“Don’t be such a codfish!”

“Join us, it’s no harm!”

“Thank you all for the kind offer but I rather not be distracted by something so childish.”

“Or you’re just afraid about how easily I’ll beat you,” Feliciano challenged with a smirk.

They all laughed and grinned, confident in Feliciano’s words.

“You? Oh no, if I were to participate, I assure you the victory could might as well be handed to me this instant.”

“Oh please, Ludwig, I know for a fact that this is the first time you have ever rowed a boat."

“Just as I know that this is also yours.”

“Yeah, but at least I have good arm movement."

“And I have good direction!”

“It’s not enough. I can spot a lot of things way better than you can."

“And I can maintain a better hold of anything,” he pointed to the fact that all their stuff were still tied to his canoe.

“If you’re so confident, then why don’t you participate and prove it?”

“Fine, I will, and once I beat you, I want an apology and full acceptance of my winning, along with reverences and praises,” he threatened, quite playfully, taking his side by Feliciano, as Carlos was readying their entrance.

“Fine then, and if I win, I want your adoration and even kisses.”

Ludwig laughed, but prepared his oar, his stature, for full on dedication to this. The rest laughed and clapped, taking their positions.

“Glad we are to have you join us, your highness. Now, as tradition calls, I’ll be the first one to head in, and with that the game officially begins and it ends once we reach the Kapil River. The only rule is to stop if any of us are in grave danger. Ready, set-” Feliciano shot Ludwig a

playful smirk, readying to sink him, even splashing some water at him from his oar, Ludwig in turn splashed at him with his hand, earning both a chuckle, "-and go!"

The river took Carlos in a clean swipe, the current rushing him off quicker than the fastest horses. Turn by turn it took the rest, until all were in its grasp, no one saved by its wild sprays, the occasional gushes of water, which at turned landed them a fish, Anthone the first to have one in his haul. They bounced, they twisted, meeting small falls, their canoes smashing constantly against small or large boulders, but lucky their material was strong enough to withstand, to keep them continuous, fishes bouncing before them as they promised. Each took their chance to extend their free hand and take to their secureness several, each earning their own sufficient pile.

As they went half through it, that's when things became dirty and they all started getting creative with how exactly they could assure their winning. Pookie, knowing that he was too at risk on Feliciano's head, decided on helping him maintain the pile safe on the canoes' flooring, having to withstand the temptation to take one of those delicious fishes into his mouth.

"No, no, no, no, no Pookie, I can't have you compromising," Feliciano joked, just as he used his oar to bring about three.

He glanced to the others, spotting as Ludwig tried to keep in his arms a pretty large one, but a bounce had made him loose it, along with several small ones that had been inside his haul. Feliciano laughed, making it obvious that he had seen that, then with pride pointed to the shinning pile he had untouched. It was just the distraction to not notice a boulder he instantly crashed on, spinning him along with the currents, making him loose many in all directions, some even flew to Rosangeliz's canoe adding to her own points. Feliciano groaned heavily once he was back to the proper direction, but it made it Ludwig's turn to laugh, rowing by him, extending his arm and actually taking one from Feliciano's messed pile to add to his own.

"Hey! No fair! You're being a thief!" Feliciano shouted.

"There are no rules that say I shouldn't," Ludwig defended, giving him one last smirk before continuing ahead.

Oh no, Feliciano was not going to leave it at that, he was determined. He found his oar and went on ahead, continuing with his catching, making sure to be the closest to Ludwig. The rest didn't matter anymore, the competition seemed to be only between them as they pushed, as they stole, as they splashed, taking their targets, shouting along banters, but in joy, in loud laughs that echoed enjoyment to the rest. They were genuinely having fun, distracted in only them, in how they could bring more grins and shouts with their crashes and teasing that they didn't notice approaching sharp rocks that Carlos had forgotten to warn them about. Knowing, the rest simply rowed aside, hoping that Ludwig and Feliciano followed their lead, but both were lost in the gleam of their eyes, Ludwig only managed to move aside by a hair, but it wasn't the same luck for Feliciano. He was heading straight to their approach, through them with what knows his chances of survival.

Ludwig instantly went to the saving. He pushed his canoe aside and jumped, taking landing in one of the rocks to then jump at Feliciano's side at his own canoe, who completely stopped rowing and instead took a tight holding of Pookie, preparing for his canoe to be smashed to pieces and for him to just swim the rest of the way, if he could even manage.

They were in the clutches, and although they did smash occasionally into the rocks, Ludwig tried to keep the boat forward, avoiding the sharpest rocks, taking the heaviest falls with strength, turning, twisting them all the way until they got to the calmer exit. Feliciano had settled as a ball unto Ludwig's chest, keeping Pookie close, gripping from time to time at the safety of his skin, but once it all settled, that they sailed in line, no new sprays, no falls, harsh currents, rocks, or even jumping fishes, Feliciano finally sat, although still maintaining a strong hold of Ludwig while Pookie settled on flying around them to make sure they were fine.

"Are you all right?" Ludwig caressed his arm, the side of his face, wet but no cuts or bruises.

"Ye-yes, I'm fine," he nodded, sitting well before him, noticing that they were finally in another river, more serene and steady, the last trace of the Danika but a small waterfall behind them. "See, I can always trust you to come save me no matter what," Feliciano smiled with deep appreciation, a beautiful one that Ludwig neared to, grinning himself and admitting in his mind that yes, he was the overly worried and protective king that will always be there for him. In their eyes, in those smiles, in that still hold, they seemed to forget about the rest who were just…staring, wondering if they even knew they were there.

"You two are so sweet," Nadia complimented, which woke them from their dreamy stupor, embarrassingly moving away even if they were still in the same canoe. Ludwig looked around for his, which at that very moment finally fell from the waterfall, upside down, all his fish free, their stuff now loose and floating along on the river. He groaned, but with Feliciano's help, they set it up right and got their things. They would surely dry them well in their next stop.

They continued in silence until they stopped for a late lunch, where they counted for fishes that they needed to cook and proclaimed Feliciano the winner. He jumped and shouted with the rest of the group and even Ludwig clapped at his success. It was while they waited for the fish to be done that Ludwig thought about how he actually had fun playing that game with them, even if he lost after trying to save Feliciano.

"I was a kid the last time I laughed like that," Ludwig admitted to Feliciano as they had some bread.

"Really?" Feliciano wondered, saddened that it took him this long to finally let himself have fun like that, even if grown, even if with such duties as becoming king in the future.

"Well, as an arising King you really can't let yourself have the time for such things. You have to be focused, attentive and ignore such frivolous things that aren't beneficial for your kingdom," he admitted.

"Although it is important to do everything you can for the wellbeing of your kingdom, it doesn't mean that you have to completely cut your own happiness. When chances like this

appear, there's no problem with taking part of them. I think our kingdom would really appreciate to know their King can be happy, that he can have fun and be more approachable to his people. It shows more positivity than you think," Feliciano smiled, trusting him into these outburst. "You really should laugh more Ludwig, you have a beautiful smile," he admitted with a faint blush, but his gaze still remnant on him to see Ludwig's eyes widen, to share a similar blush and then thank him and accept with that very lovely smile.

Their lunch was quick, soon they were back on the river, to arrive at the dimming of the day at a quaint little town. They were kind to give them supplies, a plentiful dinner and even little cabin houses for them to stay. Ludwig and Feliciano were given one right at the edge of the river, kind of distant from the merriment and fullness of the town, but still quite a relaxing place to lay down and sketch. The cabin did not have walls, but just thick curtains that they could rise as they wished. Feliciano had all the ones facing the river, the hills and the forest, raised, even if the late night, even if he could have easy approach by animals or whatever sickening winds. He didn't care, it was a wonderful view, a refreshing air, and even if he had a nice comfortable bed, he lay on the soft wood of the floor, a simple blanket over his lower body, his sketchbook before him, Pookie on the edge, his tail swishing even as he rested. Feliciano smiled, he made sure to add him to the picture.

Heavy steps, the entrance curtain was moved, Ludwig arrived, after saying he had to go stock some stuff to their own supplies after dinner. He did bring a bag with all those things, leaving it by their luggage at the door, but one particular wrapping he kept on his hands, approaching Feliciano.

"I believe you still owe me something," Feliciano reminded with a smirk, as he turned to welcome him.

Ludwig gazed around him wondering. He had forgotten.

"I won the fish challenge, and I did say I wanted your adorations and kisses as my prize," he cheekily said, expecting them that very instant.

"Oh, of course, your wonderful and extravagant highness, the most fairest in all the kingdoms, why the very Aces envy at your beauty, in your magnificent skills that no other painter or musician could compare. I should sit down and write this very instant a long elegy about all your triumphs," Ludwig bowed jokingly, earning a fit of laughter from his arising Queen. He kneeled, offering then the wrapped package. "All joking aside, I…brought you something." He presented it forward, Feliciano gazing curiously for the longest while. It was just rather odd to receive gifts from Ludwig like this now. He still ended up taking it, uncovering until he was presented with a box of colored pencils. It wasn't anything like the ones he used to have, but Feliciano could tell it was from good materials in the island that could color delightfully as any other. It would surely make do for the rest of the journey.

"Ludwig…dear Aces, thank you so much! They're wonderful! I wish I could show my appreciation more." He gazed up to him with enough splendor, hugging the box to show how dearly it was that he had really wanted them and how it now completed his sketching materials.

“Don’t fret, just thought it would be better for your sketches, also to have them now instead of waiting until Washington.” He sat, taking his spot near to him, gazing in front to quite the beautiful scene.

Feliciano placed the pencils before him, going back on his sketches to begin his coloring, choosing a past one of a view he had captured when they were flying over the Scandinavian provinces with the joker Vikings… that’s when he remembered.

“Don’t think I haven’t noticed,” he pointed.

“I thought my words of adoration were enough.”

“I said kisses too, Ludwig,” he smirked.

Ludwig flushed, trying to make it seem like he was uninterested by rolling his eyes. “Do I… do I really have to?”

“Mhm.” And Feliciano tapped his cheek, still, closing his eyes and awaiting for the approach.

Ludwig was hesitant and for a moment he wondered if he should just walk away, but Feliciano looked so peaceful, his frame so beautiful, his cheek there for the offering, surely to be as soft, a little reminder of that first kiss they had shared long ago. He finally neared, slow, nervous, but he managed to lay a simple one, enough of a sensation to have them reeling, for Feliciano to give a little moan, already lost to the feel of those lips on his skin.

“There,” Ludwig concluded, sitting back again, still blushing over how easily he let himself fall to that request.

“I said kisses,” Feliciano smirked, his feet swaying, clearly waiting for more.

“Ugh, be specific then. How many?”

“Hmmmmm,” he wondered childishly. “Ten!”

Ludwig rolled his eyes, “fine.”

He laid just as Feliciano, neared ever closer, and confidently, he began to lay them, letting themselves that bliss, for Feliciano to smile with an occasional moan, for Ludwig to even lay them as a smile. At one point he even lost count, surely going more than that ten. Each became long, an excuse for Ludwig to feel this skin against his lips, heavenly and full and both still wanted more. Feliciano turned his face then, just as Ludwig was nearing for another, but he stopped before they could crash, letting their breaths mingle, their foreheads lay against each other, teasing with temptation, but Ludwig just couldn’t and he let a disappointed sigh to let him know just how upset he was that he had to deny the paradise of his lips. He instead raised his hand, caressing at his chin, pulling his face down until he could lay that final kiss on his forehead.

“There, that’s enough kisses,” he smiled, resting his hands on the floor and looking forward, slumping as Feliciano tried to distract any of his disappointments by beginning to color.

Ludwig settled by remaining as he was, staring to the process of Feliciano's painting like a sort of mental therapy, cooling whatever storms and aches in his head. Feliciano had just finished painting one of the high mountains they have spotted, in the very same tint it would glow in the night. He was reaching now for a darker blue color to paint that very sky, with the add of whites, purples and other blues to remember the true splendor of the stars and clouds.

"You've gotten better, if that's even possible. When we were ten you were already painting canvases like the murals in the castle. I can't imagine the extent of what you can do now."

Feliciano smiled and chuckled, adding then some shine to the glow of the crescent moon. "I just never stopped. I kept on reading and Nonno even got me more art books from the around the kingdom, there were also things I found in the castle when I moved in. My inspiration as well my curiosity grew, I started trying out new things and exploring new ideas. I can actually make sculptures and mosaics now," he grinned proudly.

"Amazing," Ludwig complimented.

"Mhm…what about you?" Feliciano was curious.

Ludwig was startled back slightly, thinking and realizing that he never really pursued a hobby like this. Those past nine years his grandfather completely dedicated to teaching him everything about the Kingship, testing and cramming him up in his study room for hours about all kinds of things concerning the position. He already knew how to make all kinds of agreements by the time he was fourteen, proclamations and pledges by heart, any other times used for preparing him in skills of combat, war and strengthening his body and mind for it to fit along with his early power activation. Such things as art and music they pushed to the side, even if his own interest for them, how he wanted to indulge in the philosophy collection of any of the libraries, in the countless of stories about the Aces and in playing music boxes from the best composers of history. His only chance for freedom was training the army dogs and even so it had duty tied to it.

"The last time I touched any kind of art supply was when I was looking for the paint jar collection to send for your twelfth birthday," he remembered, any other moments just not granted.

"Really? So…you basically haven't drawn or painted anything…since we were kids?" Feliciano wondered.

"I believe so," Ludwig easily agreed.

The arising queen could not accept this.

"We're changing that right now!" He put the colored pencils between them, clearly to choose, pointing to the picture to the side, a Norwegian village they had flown over, spectacular, to detail, alive to the point that Ludwig swore he could see the figures moving.

"I canno. My abilities had remained the same as they were back then, I will only ruin it."

“You won’t! I’m sure I will still like it. I’ll help you if you’re unsure about what to do, but really, color how you wish,” Feliciano insisted.

“I can’t-”

“Please, do this with me!” He pouted, with a glint in his eyes, a shine to his skin and lips, Ludwig wondering if he had hypnotized him to accept.

He sighed and finally agreed, taking a green one, figuring he could start with the mountains, but as he inched his hand close, he hesitated, wondering if it was right to paint it all green, he remembered red in those hills too. What if this wasn’t even the right green? Where should he even start. Should he go for the edges, the top, the center? The end of the pencil was tapping into his hand as he thought on to pressure, a sign of concern that Feliciano spotted as his gaze never left his hand movements curious to how he wanted to start. Feliciano sighed and brought his hand forward, clasping his, a surprising jolt that had them both gazing to their eyes, Feliciano erupting with a confident smile.

“I’ll help,” he guided, bringing his hand to finally touch the paper, for that green to begin its filling, the grasped hand giving Ludwig the confidence to go ahead, knowing that if anything, Feliciano’s hold was there to aid.

For that little time before they headed off to sleep, they enjoyed, they smiled, a growing familiar air, a tight hold that never left, even when Ludwig changed colors, when Feliciano himself wanted to continue with his own picture. It was a needed hold, comforting and relieving, of past friendship and the chance for a new one to grow.

Chapter 39

After those three days, no more islands were spotted, but a meet of large land, their first entrance into the main shores of the Spade Kingdom, more precisely, the Indian province. It was dense jungle, blues, greens and no village, town or city to welcome them. It was rather fearful for both Ludwig and Feliciano, who throughout the days they had spent in the Oralee were used to meeting abundance of people and life no matter where they stopped. It must have been the same the rest felt, for eeriness settled between them, slowing their strokes as they all gazed to the desolation, trying to find a place to make the dock they had been promised.

In the distance they began to hear a shout, a calling, all keeping their eyes attentive to this, until finally, they spotted, at the very end of the bay, a single cabin house, a small little thing that surely held but one room. At its side stood a man, waving vigorously, anything to try and grab the attention of the coming group. They answered to it and they all began a hastened rowing, until finally their canoes met the sand of this land and they could all come down and let their feet touch this very small beach. They all came forward to this man, who bowed and offered a letter for the arising King and Queen of Hearts. Ludwig quickly ripped it apart and began reading, one from the organizers at the Spadian castle concerning how they were going to be dealing with their route from there to Washington.

“This cabin is small, but I will do what I can to make it comfortable to the Oralee guides until you are ready to leave tomorrow,” the man suggested, offering the door for them to come in as they pleased.

“For us only?” Sefina questioned.

“What about Ludwig and Feliciano?” Nadia wondered.

“We already have to go ahead,” Ludwig affirmed. "Half an hour walk from here a carriage with horses is already waiting, and we can’t stall. Were already late as it is.”

They all saddened, for it meant that they had to wish goodbye. Feliciano, as emotional as he was, took his turn thanking each one, embracing and kissing them as if they were long life friends. Ludwig instead took supplies the man had already prepared for them, ordering their luggage into bags that had been sent, having to leave the trunks and baskets. Ludwig wrapped the scepter in a special cloak, well hidden at the bottom of one of his bags. By the time he gave Feliciano his own to carry, he was done with his farewells, Ludwig giving his own with simple words and a strong bow.

“Good luck,” Michelle wished them.

“Don’t forget about us!” Rosangeliz waved.

“May the Aces bless the rest of your journey,” Carlos hoped.

Ludwig and Feliciano began this new trek on land, Feliciano constantly looking back to wave at them, to hear their shouts of promise, all until the hill they were going downward on blocked any other gaze between them. It was once again only Ludwig, Feliciano and Pookie, who was now on Feliciano's shoulder, watching well around him, especially between the trees for any kind of danger. Feliciano made sure to always stay directly on Ludwig's side, the jungle seemed even denser here, lonely, loud shrilling noises of different animals causing quite a haunting feeling. Feliciano ended up taking Ludwig's arm as a sort of comfort, to cease any fear, any trembling. Ludwig was here, Ludwig was here, he kept repeating to himself.

In the late afternoon they came upon a small little house with a quaint little family just like the Blanc in Diamonds who gave them a carriage with horses. It was not the eloquence of the past coaches they had borrowed in their journey, with it being mostly cringing wood, some hay with blankets as beds, but it was large and spacious enough with two good horses to bring it along. The letter had specified that they were meant to travel what was left of that day, the whole night, even the next day, until they arrived to Bilaspur, where it said they would meet with a Neeraja Patel who was in charge of organizing their journey through the rest of the Indian province and even the Chinese province until they got to America. All they did in the next of their trajectory in the wagon was sleep. Feliciano would try to sketch, which was almost impossible in this bumpy road or he would actually strike up a chat with Ludwig. He loved how they were more open to talk like this now, about things such as what jackets they found the most annoying, how their own dancing lessons had gone and even how much they missed their mothers. Sure, they hadn't gone close to romantic heights, but this growing friendship, of conversations where they filled in those missed years was just enough for Feliciano, and more and more he was really starting to enjoy Ludwig's presence.

On the day they arrived to Bilaspur, the guards that watched over the gates to the hilltop village stopped them. They knew who they were and even the meaning to their presence, but the path to this man was to be done by foot, through a singular path that lead up to the very top, where a magnificent palace lay, shimmering in colors to delight, halting them both to the spot as they admired its richness along with the ones of the rest of the buildings that showered down, that introduced the village. All kinds of shades of blues, of silvers, jewels, arches, peeks, Spade symbols decorating every building, even the very people that peeked through the doors and windows to witness these new arriving guests. As Ludwig and Feliciano climbed, they got quite the crowd, following them, their eyes wondered, like they were the true jewels in this village, ignorant to all the richness they were already surrounded with. Ludwig kept Feliciano close, for it started to become rather odd, the kind of attention they were getting was almost like worshipping, unlike anything they had met with crowds such as this. They all knew why they were here and thus they followed them to meet him, children pointing and guiding, with excited laughs and skips that Feliciano was tempted to join, but Ludwig still maintained his strong hold that wouldn't dare let him go too far.

The palace came closer and closer, more for them to take details in the decorated marbles, to each little intricate design, tall arches, imperial domes, expanded windows and doors, an entrance gate to match its high refinery. It was desolate, no one was there to welcome them as they hoped, not even guards, just the rest of the villagers behind them, waiting alongside them.

Suddenly, not from the gate, but from the sides of the palace, a young girl rushed forward with guards following behind her, out of breath, weak, hunching and close to falling exhausted on the floor, but her dark heavy eyes on them refused to let her so. She straightened, she presented, as elegant as her prestigious sari, lahanga and choli, but her gaze remained just as awed, silence continuing on between them for she was nervous at what kind of words she should use for the presence before her. She had to hasten, it was rather rude to leave them there with no kind of greeting or words.

“You both don’t understand the honor that we all feel to have you here in the village. We will all do what we can to give you the stay you both deserve.” She was still nervous, a lost look in her eye, clear to them that her mind was pensive on something else that was not really before her.

“The honor should be ours. Thank you for accepting our stay here,” Ludwig told.

“The village and the people are absolutely beautiful, and the palace, breathtaking. Any kind of stay here would be perfect, thank you,” he bowed and gave his usual charming smile, that caused the girl to grin largely in return, her ease coming, her nervousness slowly leaving.

“As kind as-” she had to cut herself before she continued, she was given clear instructions to not mention this.

“I really don’t mean to be rushing, but we were told to meet with a man named Neeraja Patel,” Ludwig wondered.

“Oh yes, I’m his younger sister, Priya Patel. I was sent to bring you inside, come along.” She signaled the guards and they in turn signaled others in the palace, thus the gates were opened for their entrance. She readily headed inside, looking back to them, giving them the assurance to come and for her to lead them as she should. They instantly did, leaving the crowds, Feliciano giving them a wave before he focused on keeping a tight hold of his bags as they went along.

More secluded, more calm, as if they stood away from the village. More richness was presented to them, all walls, all floors, each corner, decorated extravagantly, a new thing to spot with every gaze. Their eyes were so focused around them, on the mirrors, on the vases, desks, tapestries, that Priya had to keep constant looks to make sure they were still following her.

They handed their bags to some servants along the way, who brought them to their already assigned room, before climbing up, surely to the tallest part until they stopped before a large salon, as richly decorated as the rest, all kinds of pillows and blankets around the floors, along with plants and…were those winged blue tigers and…a peacock?

“Ah, you have finally arrived,” one man greeted aloud, spreading his arm and making his presence, although small, large enough to resonate across the whole area, seeming to pour out of the very large windows. He stood from his place, at the very center against the wall, covered by a rich jeweled veil and the most comfortable pillows at his vicinity.

“I am Neeraja Patel. I assume everything has gone well with your trip and arrival. You two must be hungry, join me for dinner, my servants have already prepared a table.” He ushered them down until they arrived to a separate room with a very large table flooded with all kinds of foods native to the province. Both Ludwig and Feliciano were overwhelmed, the food seemed to pile, and surely no matter what they did, they wouldn’t be able to take from everything, even if the scent was amazing and they were indeed eager to try what they could.

They sat, finding space next to each other, already plates presented for them to pick and serve, along with rich glasses of Mango Lassi, which Feliciano loved and even asked for more as they dined. Priya then sat and ate as well, joining in what Ludwig thought was rather frivolous conversations of this palace’s history, Feliciano asking about all kinds of architectural details, even how this placed worked with weathers. As Ludwig gazed around, hoping for a moment to ask, his eyes landed on Priya as he noticed something rather peculiar. She was stilled in a trance, her eyes lost in a definite looking, a direction that was in Feliciano’s sitting, her arms trembling as she was trying to reach to serve herself from the carrot and lentil soup. He was about to point this out and ask, but it was just as Feliciano noticed as well.

“Priya, are you alright?” He asked with real concern, enough to break her travel, for her to look around and ground herself once more, flushing in embarrassment.

In fear she kept her eyes to the table, beginning to pick up some plates. “Ye-yes, I am alright, thank you for your concern, but, will you excuse me to the kitchen, Neeraja, I’ll help the servants with cleaning.”

“Priya, you don’t have to-”

“I will!” Once she had the empty plates, she left, without a glance, without a care, like she had never been in the table in the first place.

“Is she…really going to be okay, sir." Feliciano asked.

Neeraja remained silent, focusing mostly on his drink, hesitant to say this, but surely Ludwig and Feliciano, from the moment they entered this village, must have noticed, must have been filled with questions that he knew it was best he answered that moment.

“Did you ever hear of Bilaspur?” He asked curiously.

“We have to say no. We never did until we came here,” Feliciano answered honestly.

Neeraja didn’t seem insulted or maddened, just understanding, placing his drink on the table, not interested in the food any longer.

“After all, you’re not native Spadians, it’s to be expected, but to be honest, I’m surprised the crown gave me the privilege of organizing your route, even letting you into this village, but Queen Arthur’s family has known mine for long, I even worked some time in Washington. I suppose he rather trust the Heartian royals with someone he himself trusted,” he smiled.

“That’s very nice, but why would there be doubt in coming here? This place is beautiful and everyone is so sweet.”

“Well…except…” Ludwig wanted to comment, but he didn’t know if he would be trespassing something sensitive.

“Yes?” Neeraja truly wanted to hear.

“The kind of…attention we get here, it’s…nothing like we’ve ever seen, people act…so strangely around us, like…they’re worshipping, yet everyone’s eyes seem so lost and perhaps even possessed…just like…” Ludwig gazed over to where Priya had been sitting, clearly mentioning what just happened to her, because it was the same he basically got from the rest of the village.

Neeraja managed to smile, taking from his drink, readying himself to tell. “This village is cursed, some of the lingering effects after the war of the blackened decades. We fear we might never be relieved of it no matter the studies I did back in the Washington castle. We’ve managed though, got us even a reputation,” he chuckled.

“What kind of reputation?” Feliciano wondered.

“Psychics, fortune tellers, oracles, whatever you want to name it when people know the destinies and futures of every people they meet and of the lands of the four kingdoms.”

Ludwig and Feliciano silenced, in deep bewilderment for Neeraja to be able to continue. “This village is full of them, each in different ways to foretell. Some can only see the bad, others the good, some can only see things that have to do with family, others with love or with journeys, some with teachings, hatred or even sacrifices. It’s not complete though. People in this village don’t get visions, just senses and feelings that they try to interpret to the best they can. My sister…” he faltered for a moment, worrying and wondering about her, hoping he could do something to help, to even rid this. “Is what we call a sabhee drashta, an all seer, she’s one of the only ones in the whole village who actually gets full visions, sees it as clearly as if it was a painting. That trance you saw her in, just another of her strong visions, been more vibrant since I told her you two were coming here.”

Ludwig and Feliciano looked to each other with question, wondering how they played into it to cause this.

“What about you? Do you have any of these visions?” Ludwig instead asked.

“I’m a rare cas. I too was also a sabhee drashta, but while I was in Washington I met with other priest as well as the Jack. They taught me a way I can better control it. I’ve learned to hold them and practically submerged them until I see nothing…some things are just better off not knowing.” He turned solemn, eyes lost to memories of visions and how they had affected in his lifetime, things he rather not remember, distracting himself in tapings against the glass he was drinking from.

“Have you given your sister the same teachings?” Feliciano asked.

“She’s in the process, but it’s not an easy one, but after she gets the hang of it, we’ll start offering classes for the village to help.” He hoped dearly for that.

“And…” Feliciano was doubtful to mention, but after those looks he got and after realizing what it was, he wanted to know, he wanted a peek, “what did they see about us to…get like that?” He paused, trying to ease his figure to not show his small desperation and his deepest curiosity for what Neeraja would be willing to say, revealing great paths of their future that Feliciano would be fine if even a hint was told. Maybe it could reveal something big, get them to prepare, maybe even understand his relationship with Ludwig more.

Neeraja didn’t give an expression to know, he turned away, focusing on his drink for now. “I don’t know, I haven’t asked them so they haven’t told me. Everyone who knows me knows that I really dislike talking about this…but, I do admit, whatever it was…must have been something grand, something that would truly bring this reaction for when the moment comes to all the four kingdoms.” He tried to imagine, just as Ludwig and Feliciano did, not understanding how they, two mere arising rulers, one with an early power activation, another with two much power to control also tied with a lot of mystery, with a lot of teachings still to be taught, as well as a delayed coronation because Feliciano had refused a promised marriage to the Aces, could one day do something to bring an entire village of future seers into silence, into worship, into ultimate thanks and the most loyal attention and servitude.

No more words were given to the matter. Neeraja motioned them to follow him to his map room, where he would show them their official route to Washington.

The rest of the trip was meant to be done in a carriage ride, one they would start tomorrow, riding from Bilaspur until they reached Hong-Kong in the Chinese province, where they would switch carriages and meet a group who will accompany them. There was only one stop in Shanghai for supplying and preparing, because from there on they would walk into the American province, until they arrived to the very walls that surrounded Washington, Neeraja explaining that it was built many centuries ago as protection for the big city during the war of the blackened decades. Once there, the guards will surely lead them to the Spadian castle. As it had been with Ludwig and Feliciano’s peculiar journey, it was away from common routes, secretive and surely no large cities to attract the attention of any wandering Khaos’s men. Ludwig approved of it and as soon as they both understood well, Neeraja lead them to their room, a big one that was just the size of theirs back in Berlin. It had a large open balcony door with only but a dense curtain to cover it, letting in the most comfortable breeze. Once they were alone, Ludwig and Feliciano decided to spend their time by the balcony, studying this village and its wondrous architecture, even the beauty of the jungle it was surrounded with. They remained silent, occupying their attention to the wind, to the colors their vision took and just ultimate peace. They were already dressed in their sleeping robes, their luggage prepared for their exit the next day. They could sleep out here if they wanted, but it was still an active night that would surely keep them awake if they dared to. Ludwig would break from this view from time to time to gaze over to Feliciano, who was still, his expression pensive, no other movement from him, not on a sketchbook, even as Pookie nuzzled expecting his attention.

“You’re thinking about these people’s visions,” Ludwig quickly identified.

Feliciano laid his face on the rail of the balcony, letting his breaths being the only thing to cause in him movement. “Why wouldn’t I? It’s quite unsettling to know that this very village I’m looking down on knows how the rest of my life will go, everything that vexes and will continue to as I live on…I kind of wished they would tell us something…I really wish I knew more."

“Why would you? It’s as Neeraja said, some things are just not worth seeing or knowing,” Ludwig said with the same expression as Neeraja had told them, in his own solemnity.

“Then…for those things that are not worth seeing, maybe they could tell us how to avoid them, how to stop them, get us prepared and just…make some things clearer.” Feliciano sometimes wished it could be that easy, without all this dilemma, questioning and uncertainty.

“It’s destiny, Feliciano. I believe that no matter what we do…there’s no exact way to stop what is awaiting us. If we would know all these things, we would just be anxious and always fretting on how we could stop it, but fate has its way of always conceding what was meant. Maybe it’s just best we leave it a surprise, a wondering we can find on our own, with different things to look forward to. Our answers will arrive in their time.”

For minutes on they remained in silence, in the rushing wind, in the tiredness that slowly began to reign on them.

“You’re…right,” Feliciano had to admit. “Thank you Ludwig, I should really just calm my mind about this, and like you always say-” he suddenly sat up, pulling his hair back, deepening his voice and trying to look as serious as possible, “-we only have to be focusing on the journey! Get those orbs of Validity and stop fooling around Feliciano!”

Ludwig laughed, rolling his eyes. “Stop, this is a disgrace to me,” he joked, departing himself from the edge, letting himself stare to the giggles and laughter that then came from Feliciano, so lively and beautiful, oh he could just- he shook the thought from his head quick. “Come on, let’s go to sleep.” Feliciano had to agree, he was really starting to become tired and those beds looked extremely comfortable.

The next morning, Neeraja gave them an excellent breakfast and afterwards they were to meet at the gates of the palace, where already a new rich carriage was awaiting them. It was to be pulled by four horses, all with strength and speed to get them on time to their next goal. Neeraja wished them farewell and luck, offering a basket of food to cook for their next meal courses. They both took it gladly. They had eaten amazingly here. Priya was there to wish her own farewells, bowing and smiling just as her brother, hoping for the best…even if she knew already what will happen.

She suddenly remembered, just as Feliciano was taking the first step inside the coach.

“Your highness, wait,” she rushed forward, as close as possible, keeping them both near, looking around herself to make sure no other could peek into her words. She met with her brother’s distaste about this, but she quickly glared back. It was only a couple of things,

nothing large for him and the rest of their servants to worry. “You must have heard by now about this village’s peculiarity and my special case. I cannot simply word out everything that will happen, but I can warn and prepare you with these words.”

She had their attention, they stopped, gazing to her with quite the eagerness. “Do what you can to strengthen your magic, both by yourself and together. Really start to take it seriously, schedule time for each and every day, at least an hour, but if you weren’t so busy I would even suggest two. Ludwig, I know you have a book that was given to your grandfather about this, do every spell, every trick, every information while you’re on the journey, and once you return to Berlin, get new books, create new things, never stop testing the limits your power can make…there’s more to it than you both think you know.” It was her first warning, coated with worry and desperation, a plead enough to tell them that something large depended on it.

They both nodded, with promise and seriousness.

“Ludwig…” she really wanted to say more, but her time was limited and she couldn’t reveal much more, not when Feliciano was there, not when she knew his resolve and what he was hiding from him. “Be weary, your plans might not come out as you hope. I would advise… you listen to Feliciano and really trust him…his emotions for you are strong, stronger than what you wanted to avoid…understand you’re not alone, he will always be by your side, always. Remember that your bond is the strengthening that will one day save…” she hesitated, deciding on stopping, she had said enough, now she just hoped he could really understand, even as he lay frozen wondering if she really knew all the depths he was going through and what that meant for their future. He nodded, a quick thanks, the true appreciation seen in the calm of his blue eyes and even figure.

“And Feliciano…” she smiled, with no dread, with shinning eyes of hope and feast, “my brother and I will always be honored to attend anything.” She curtsied, but Feliciano didn’t understand for what, he just nodded and agreed, with his own smile, coming down from the steps of his coach to embrace her, thankful to the words she gave them that were more a blessing than she could think. As for her last words, he would realize sooner or later and they will be clear for that moment. With her joy as she said it, it surely meant nothing evil or haunting.

They departed with friendly waves, now nothing to interrupt their boarding, Ludwig closing the door in finality. They were off, to other new terrains, new provinces and with magic to practice, a resolve they committed to as soon as Ludwig took out the book.

Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

> Being honest, I'm not proud of this chapter, one that kind of has to have meaning being the 40th but my mind was going through a lot while writing it and I didn't feel like I gave this one enough until I guess the end. But it's still important you read it guys, sorry. Still…I hope you enjoy despite!

Tall slim mountains in blues and greens, beautiful villages, prestigious temples at their tops or slopes, active rivers, birds and even dragons flew above them in liberty. Feliciano had already captured enough in his sketches the last three days and he truly wanted to have more, but he really had to stay true to his power and magic teaching, especially after Priya's warning.

"Focus, sharp, cut," Feliciano repeated to himself, eyes shut, both his hands together over his face as he got the right concentration. Once he considered himself to be ready, he opened his eyes, he swiped his fingers and cut the little brownie he put before himself to practice, without a single touch of his skin or of an item. He clapped in triumph, jumping on his seat, as a reward taking a piece and placing it in his mouth, moaning at the amazing chocolaty taste. Ludwig just did the same with his own brownie, not minding at all in sharing the taste.

"These came out amazing, Ludwig," Feliciano complimented.

"Really? It's a very simple recipe Alfred once taught me on a visit. Even I could make a nice batch the first time I tried," Ludwig reminisced, remembering how proud he had been, now the recipe one of the many he tried whenever the time was available.

"You should still teach me the next time we bake," Feliciano suggested.

"If the ingredients appear again, sure."

Feliciano couldn't wait already.

"Okay, now, together," and Ludwig brought forward many potatoes they kept in their hold, all which needed to be cut for a potato salad he craved for.

This time they let their magic combine, a passing of energy that they felt even in their minds, then spreading throughout their bodies. Keep you power down, keep your power down, keep your power down, Feliciano kept repeating to himself as he felt their unified impulse. With their combined power, they slashed, fiercer and quicker, in the same movements that made it seem like a mirror, until all their potatoes were but messed pieces. Ludwig gave a small smile and Feliciano clapped with the same exaltation, only to be stopped when their carriage came

to a sudden halt. So distracted they were in their practice none had dared to peek out to where they reached, so when Ludwig checked, he noticed bustling people, the lightening of buildings, entrance into the middle of a town alive in its usual routine. It was rather sudden, for the last thing they spotted out the window was a valley, river, hills, no such closeness to any civilization.

“Your highness.” Ludwig turned and spotted a man who had taken hold of the horses, before the stable the animals were trained to stop at once they reached Hong Kong. Oh yes, Hong Kong, Feliciano and him were supposed to go find that group now.

He nodded to the man as he bowed, returning inside to tell Feliciano, pouring the cut potatoes into a jar, getting their bags and making sure they weren’t leaving anything important behind. Pookie took his usual sitting in Feliciano’s shoulder, curiously looking to these new surroundings as the two royals listened to the man on where they should go next. They thanked him, then Feliciano thanked the horses with caresses and nuzzles before he departed with Ludwig into the bright streets, confusing, full and strange.

They entered the marketplace, where all kinds of things were offered, shouted, others running to give their interest, buy, test, or be disappointed. Feliciano had given his liking in many things, like the amazing carpets, flowers, tattoo kiosks, lanterns, even an artist creating jaded masterpieces. Ludwig could clearly see his wonder, stopping them as he would watch different demonstrations.

“Feliciano,” he would scold, taking his arm and pulling him away, having to decide to take a hold of his hand the rest of the way so the surroundings wouldn’t continue to temp him away. But nothing was really strong enough to hold him from his big appetite.

A scent took Feliciano's interest, a wonderful one that even Pookie joined him in as they breathed this night air to try and find it. By luck, they happened to be right across it, a kiosk selling a ball kind of snack. Further reading by the symbols at the top, since Feliciano couldn’t read Cantonese, he understood that they were fish balls. Pookie seemed to have come to the same conclusion, who even began to fly close to it, wanting his own. Feliciano just couldn’t take it, he ended up taking out a small little wallet with money and ended up buying two little bags, one for himself, and one so he could give to Pookie, handing him his treats as they continued to walk along by Ludwig’s side.

“All right, and that’s the last thing we’re going to buy, you hear me,” Ludwig scolded.

“Oh look, they engrave your name on a potion vile!” It was like he hadn’t even listened to the blond.

“Don’t you dare! Come on!” And this time Ludwig pulled him away with real force, only to be halted once he met what was before him.

A shelf, but not just any shelf, as the man demonstrated, it was one you could accommodate to however size and form, to fit into anything and anywhere you wanted. Having such an item would be perfect to organize his books in the King’s study room in Berlin.

Feliciano chuckled, noticing the interest and wonder in his eyes. “It’s only nine silver Spadian coins,” Feliciano only continued to temp him, “think of all the things you could save there other than books and then place it in the prettiest way possible in our room wall. It would be amazing!”

“It would be the perfect space to put my Heartian coin collection, my study cards, my pens, even my battle practice scrolls,” and that was just a couple from the many things Ludwig had in mind.

In the end, he ended up buying it, tugging it into one of their bags and Feliciano hadn’t stopped chuckling.

“Stop!” Ludwig was still too embarrassed, but it only intensified Feliciano’s laughter, and godsdammit, a grin was growing on his own face and slowly it changed until it joined Feliciano in his own fits of laughter.

“Okay, okay, were done, were done!” Ludwig finally managed to silence into only smiles and small chuckles, to bring their hands to a hold as they continued the rest of the way, finally out of the marketplace and into more residential areas.

They were told by the man that they had to go up a street named Wong Chuk Hang, which they spotted easily with its rising carts that went through most part of its hill. They thought it no wrong to ride them, going forward in the direction the man had told them, a better view for them to see all kinds of houses and streets until they spotted it. It was hard to miss as the man had said, this house had a paneling with a large flower mending in a distinguishable homey glow that Ludwig and Feliciano were instantly drawn to. The cart stopped and they both came down to the street, easy steps until they reached the rather small woodened house, lost in the shadows of fire, confused on how exactly they should announce their arrival when no door was present. Should they knock, should they shout?

There was a sudden ruckus, shouts, banging and crashing items, and then something ripped apart the flimsy paper of this wall, a pot that could have smash Feliciano directly in the face if Ludwig hadn’t moved him out of the way in time. After the pot, a girl came crashing through, with a potent kick, proud and flying, the wall now torn to shreds. With a punch she brought the pot itself into flying pieces, landing on the floor with a gracious and practiced position. Once she noticed her feat, her face glowed in joy with child innocence, her long brown hair jumping along with her as she clapped and spun.

“Told you all I could do it!” She acclaimed, turning, Ludwig and Feliciano left flabbergasted, clearly confused and slightly scared.

“Um…Cheng!” She called, suddenly shy and nervous, seeming to hide herself in a meek stature.

Four people then reached the hole she had created, first of all checking if she was okay and if she truly destroyed the pot as she should have done and then eyes finally falling on the two important figures.

“Ah, your highness!” This Cheng bowed and the other three quickly did the same, nervous and fearful.

“Okay, so…we can totally explain this,” a young boy quickly hoped to discuss.

“We’re sorry, we weren’t expecting your visit so soon,” the woman in turn said, trying to move away the royal’s intention from whatever nonsense Lei was bound to say.

“Please, please, come in,” Cheng welcomed, for a moment wondering if they could just enter through the newly made hole, but a glare from Lien stopped him, deciding to simply roll up the blind that was the true door. While Cheng ushered for them to enter, the young girl followed behind to work along in ordering the house.

Hurriedly they hid…targets, dummies, bows, arrows, swords, knives, daggers, all kinds of pointy things that made Feliciano tremble the more as they moved around trying to make everything disappear. They did so swiftly, turning down fires, replacing with vases, plants, paintings, rugs, tables, incense, simple candles, using magic to fix the hole and dressing themselves in their own comfortable clothing, all in wonderful blues and silvers that uttered peace and tranquility…despite all the dangerous things they just hid right before their eyes. Once they were all presented, they bowed once again, now showing more respect and appearance to the Heart royals. Ludwig and Feliciano were still too stupefied to give them a definite answer.

“Um…” Feliciano uttered first, yet no words seemed to reach him yet.

“Yes, um, we’re very sorry about that, but we are part of the Spadian High Protection Squadron and we do need to practice every chance we get,” Lien excused.

“Spadian High Protection Squadron?” Feliciano instantly questioned.

“Only the best to fit the job of leading the arising Heartian rulers on what’s left of the road to Washington!” One boy proclaimed with deep meaning and a resounding voice.

“We work for the castle. Fancy specialized guards you could say,” Lei tried to explain.

“So you really are the group they wrote to us about?” Feliciano understood.

“Yes, an honor to meet you, your highness. I am Lien Chung, these are my cousins, Cheng, Lei and Mei Wang, and Young Soo,” she introduced each, all taking their own personal greetings.

Once that part was out of the way, they prepared the table for dinner, a flamboyance of different plates from the region, standing quite a contrast to the danger that had been habituating. Noodle soups, spring rolls, dumplings, potstickers, rice and a very nice seasoned chicken, Feliciano took from all, and although Ludwig had indeed enjoyed the food, he was slightly gloomed because he couldn’t have the potatoes he had already cut in the carriage. Feliciano, as friendly as ever, easily found himself chatting to them, learning of their coming provinces, more about this Spadian group, the kind of training they went through and continued to practice, as well as finding out that Cheng, Lei and Mei were all younger

siblings to the Jack of Spades, Yao Wang. He was the one who even suggested this particular group of their force, trusting well their abilities to go against any dangers that they tried hard would not occur on what was left of the journey. Ludwig then joined once they started talking about different kinds of fighting tactics, taking mental notes and trying to see how he and Feliciano could use it as well with their own kinds of teachings and magic.

With dinner over, they said they should prepare themselves to sleep, they were to leave the very next morning on course to Shanghai, and Ludwig and Feliciano obeyed, both being granted their own personal room, comfortable and homey after having spent the last two nights sleeping in a coach. They instantly drifted off as soon as their heads found contact with their pillows.

Yong was the one who awoke them the next morning, with loud yells and laughter that Ludwig and Feliciano couldn't ignore, groaning as they dressed in their own style of blues and picking their bags. They had a quick breakfast in the household, all while watching the others run around getting their own luggage, shouting, hurrying, making sure nobody forgot something since the house would be locked well before leaving. Once it was all done, the house behind them, off into the new morning, they took the known cart ride down the hill, through the streets, all until they reached a sort of warehouse, only their presence for their loud voices to echo through the building. Ludwig was just about to ask what they were doing there until they stopped before…was that a carriage or a ship? It had wheels…but it was just too big, an immenseness with even a deck, windows that showed rooms, even a sort of steering at the front. While the group boarded, preparing the odd thing, Feliciano stared on with ultimate wonder, taking it to detail to later draw in his sketchbook, while Ludwig could only continue to stare with question, disbelieving and not sure if he should even step on it. Feliciano was more than excited to, and so were the rest, looking to them from the sides, waiting.

"So…do you guys want to get on or are you seriously planning on walking all the way to Shanghai?" Lei teased, but with impatience.

"Don't, walking will probably take you weeks. Come on! We can't be stalling or else the castle worries," Mei hurried, back into the thing to prepare and work.

Feliciano ended up having to pull Ludwig in, into this square thing which even held a little hall that lead to a table to eat, a mini kitchen, some rooms to sit, rest, sleep…there was even one for games!

"Get used to it, we'll practically live here for the next three days," Lien warned as she took her side by Cheng at the wheel, ready, giving a nod to Lien.

"Yong!" She called.

"On it!" He opened a sort of compartment, a weird device inside, the only thing known but a couple of Spadian symbols. Yong took a deep look of those symbols, closed his eyes and breathed in a spell. The symbols began to alight, a spread that slowly gave this entire thing life, a rumbling going on under them until it disappeared. Yong closed the compartment and

gave a signal to Cheng and Lien. They both nodded and in turn they gave Lei and Mei their own signal, for them to show acceptance after gazing around the area. Cheng began to move this sort of carriage out of the warehouse, into the streets, with the meet of population, Lei and Mei continuing to give signals to show when it was safe, when to stop, when to let a group cross and when they could go fast ahead without a care. Ludwig and Feliciano, still curious as to how this worked, remained by the deck, watching how the surroundings just flew by them, how everything remained standing, in a comfort that could actually let them rest and work on anything without worry of falling or shaking. No one paid attention to this huge thing, they were used to it, just as the roads, surely some weird Spadian contraption that all had accepted to.

Soon enough they left the city behind, roads between woods, green hills, lakes and rivers, quite a beauty, but Ludwig and Feliciano still remained stupefied to everything, afraid to move, afraid to even let their bags drop to the floor.

“Um…what’s wrong with you two?” Mei wondered after she easily let herself slide down from the top.

Lien chuckled, “they’ve probably never seen a carriage like this.”

“Oh, but don’t worry about it, it’s not going to explode or anything. We’ve used it plenty of times and all kinds of families around Spades own one. Surely they will be traded to your kingdom in the future,” Mei explained hoping to ease them.

The rest began to move freely around, making sure everything was working fine, joking in their own chats, some talk of playing games and making some snacks. With that normality, Ludwig and Feliciano slowly accepted to it, joining along themselves in those conversations. Ludwig helped on checking the carriage from time to time, even having a turn in spinning and turning the huge thing once they met with a winding road. Feliciano helped Lien with all the cooking, both sharing recipes and creating quite a mix of their foods for breakfast, snack, lunch and dinner. Ludwig and Feliciano used a lot of their free time to either join the group in card games or train their magic, learning and applying new things that weren’t in the book with the knowledge of the group.

They passed quite the beautiful sceneries for Feliciano to sketch and color in the nights. Ludwig would gladly stare on to them, sometimes joining Feliciano in the coloring, both creating their space to peacefully do it together without disturbing the other even if they were sharing one sketchbook. Lately Ludwig had learned to accept whatever he did, he was finding the beauty in what he could do, no matter if good or bad, just enjoying and being proud of his own skill, Feliciano always smiling that way that made him want to continue, wanting to see that grin all throughout.

On the late afternoon of that third day, the city was finally showed to them, a splendorous jewel that took all the coast of this river, quite beautiful, with a towering temple to reign unlike anything they had ever seen. Feliciano couldn’t keep his face from the window as they drove past the far scenery, soon making their entrance into all its streets, activity and life, there before him true, for him to be a part of, to gaze to the intricacies of golds and blues of their structures, of their houses, signs, and different kinds of lights glowing and brimming. They continued deeper in their drive until they reached a sort of fortress, at its entrance a

unique symbol of Spades along with those of the crown, which meant territory of royalty. The carriage went right in until it reached a center, all kinds of people running and preparing to greet.

All instantly bowed in precise order as soon as Ludwig and Feliciano touched their grounds.

“Your highness.”

“It is an honor.”

“We hope your stay here is to your liking,” many of them whispered, only to move away once they passed, to the rush, to the surely hastiness that came with being a large Spadian High Protection Squadron base.

As they were led by the group across the halls to get to their room, Feliciano marveled at how beautiful they kept everything inside, with jewels, mosaics, marble and tapestries, a powerful sense of magic and presence of other known creatures.

“All kinds of people have and still work here,” Mei began to explain seeing Feliciano’s fascination. “From elves, fairies, sorcerers, wizards, tamers of all kind, and stories go around that even angels,” Mei whispered that last part like a big secret, “they all helped to build this place and still help to keep it strong, beautiful and rich, but just wait till you see the Spadian castle.”

They took a lift to one of the high towers, to the residential areas where a room was prepared for them. With its grandeur, comfort, luxury and the amazing view to the city, Ludwig and Feliciano didn’t wish to leave, their dinners brought and both enjoying it in their own kind of comfort, silent, only but a few words between them still complimenting their accommodations.

While having their dessert of a Chinese cake, Feliciano worked on his sketching while Ludwig busied himself on some reading. Feliciano truly wanted to capture the centering temple, but due to the room location, part of it was covered, and no matter where he stood or turned, he was not given a complete image. He noticed that his own tower continued upward, higher than the near buildings, which meant that if he went to the top, not only will he have a better look of the temple, but of the entire city. He hurriedly picked his things wanting to head out instantly, jumping with an excited step as he went to the door.

“Where are you going?” Ludwig asked, with a scolding look as he still held the book before him.

“I’m just going to the top of the fortress to have a better view of the Lim Chen Han temple to draw. It’ll only be a couple of minutes. This is a fortress, there’s nothing to fear,” Feliciano convinced.

Ludwig glared on, but ended up sighing in approval, finding confidence in the strength of this base. “All right, but bring Pookie with you and remember to use that emergency spell we taught each other if anything,” he advised, going back to his book.

Pookie, having heard the command, flew over and took his ready protection stance on Feliciano's shoulder as per usual, earning from him a chuckle and a hand reaching to pet the little thing as he headed out, closing the door behind him and settling on his mission.

His trek was simpler than he thought, and all the directions he asked was from a wandering maid that helped him as to which lift would bring him to where he wanted to go. He swayed on his own toes as he was raised, smiling over to Pookie and thinking about what kind of color should he choose to capture the temple's sapphires. Once it landed on the floor, that he could move forward, one side showing the expanse of the city, the cold wind hitting, making him shiver and blowing his curls and clothes, the other but a wall. He moved forward until the wall ended and he could meet with the fullness of the temple, the great view, and two cloaked figures, in familiar blues, surely members who came out to enjoy the nice air and amazing view. Feliciano was just about to greet them, hoping they wouldn't mind his presence.

"-they feel protected here, now would have been a perfect time to kill them."

"You know the orders, no harm is supposed to come to the arising Queen of Hearts. Besides, this placed is swarmed with all kinds of guards and protection spells, if we did something we would have been easily captured. Just stick to our original plan."

"This spying business was a load of crap. Weeks just to tell the rest that they would be here. Waste of time it was."

Feliciano took instant hiding behind the wall, freaking and covering whatever noise or suddenness Pookie would do by wrapping him well in his arms.

"It was just to assure them of what kind of route the Spadian crown chose for them. Knowing they're here in Shanghai means they're going to take the Wu Si Lu route to Washington. We can prepare a good capture, they will be on foot, unaware and unarmed, we'll get rid of the others and have the arising King and Queen of Hearts taken to King Khaos immediately, then we will reach the walls to commence the attack of the city."

"It won't be a city once were done with it."

Feliciano could tell one was smirking proudly.

"We have planned this for months and have done well in keeping it away from ears of the kingdom. It's as Khaos said, everyone will be too preoccupied with their visit, the city will might as well be ours."

"Then it's Paris."

"Moscow."

"And finally Berlin." Such fury and vengeance in the way he said Hearts' capital, like the city itself could be the biggest enemy.

"Only a matter of ten days," one reminded.

Anything else Feliciano couldn't hear…he had run off quickly before they could notice him.

He needed to tell Ludwig.

Chapter 41

Chapter Notes

> I almost decided not to post this because of this massive headache I have, well I almost didn't even finish because of it. Then I thought I should since Eurovision is going to take my time from writing this week :'D Hope you enjoy this chapter!

"And you didn't see their faces?" Lien went on with her continuing questions, pacing the room they decided to talk about this, finding that the situation deserved no calm.

"I couldn't without risking myself, but they were wearing those blue robes I told you about," Feliciano said.

"It's a trainee robe, your highness, hundreds of people in this base wear it along with the same statures you gave us," Cheng groaned into his hands.

"Then just tell the rest of the base what I heard, they'll question everyone, maybe they'll be able to find them," Feliciano tried to help.

"Feliciano, we're leaving in a couple of hours, there won't be enough time. What if they can't?" Mei added.

"With the announcement and while they address everyone, they'll send a message to the others. If they know we won't be taking the Wu Si Lu route, the obvious choice would be the Fang Jian route, where they'll easily capture us and that's our last chance to get to Washington safe without taking further detours," Lei explained.

"What about the attack then? We can't just leave the city vulnerable like that. We have to send a message to the castle." Feliciano was desperate, he did not want to see an entire city suffer such casualties, not when he knew this, not when they could do something to prevent it.

"We can't…"

"Why not?" Feliciano was letting himself turn indignant.

"Because we're the ones that are supposed to bring them," Cheng tapped harshly at a box he took resting on, surely just as agitated and stressed.

Feliciano slumped, instant sorrow contorting his face, a broken expression that was close to tearing away in whimpers. Ludwig tried whatever comfort he could by placing a hand on his back, rubbing and easing, thinking, for the same weight lay on him.

“Then what can we do?” He asked.

“Change our plans,” Lien decided.

“We’ll ride horses instead of walking, take the Fang Jian route. It’s longer, but with our horses we can try to get to the Washington wall in eight days,” Lei explained.

“But that’s only two days before the attack, and who knows if they might change it when they don’t find us in the Wu Si Lu route,” Feliciano realized.

“Then we’ll just have to be the quickest we can,” Lien seemed to challenge.

“And hope that the castle has a plan ready,” Mei hoped and so did the rest.

The fortress accepted their request for the horses, the strongest and fastest ones they held, beautiful big ones that even intimidated Feliciano as they prepared them to hold their supplies. They were all brought to the gates of the building, Lien leading, for she knew best the directions, with a raise hand, signaling that they should wait while the guards prepared the opening of the gate and just some last stillness before they rode in the sure hastiness they would need.

Feliciano breathed in a blessing spell under his mouth, mostly for the horses who were to run their trek.

Once the gates were opened, making sure they were all together, recalling what they planned, Lien shouted, along with their horses’ proud neighing as they began their speeds, into the meet of the city, all throughout rushing, uncaring to what was on their way, focused on maintaining themselves on their powerful animals, their hair and clothes flying, their intent and purpose shown strongly as they passed on streets, stepping away any insignificance that couldn’t equate the safety of an entire city. Soon Shanghai was far at their backs, only as the memory of a day, what mattered being what was before them, what they had to continue and needed to be strong and resilient for. Feliciano took a last glimpse of the Lim Chen Han temple, seeming like their last goodbye of the city, of safety, of the tranquility and determination he wanted to draw it in last night before he overheard the conversation that changed it. He felt immense danger hover before them as he settled his gaze frontal, joining along with the speed of the horses, with the urgency of what they held, in their hands the saving of such an important city to Spades and the rest of the kingdoms.

They could do this, eight days, make it in eight days.

Feliciano was resolute and confident they would.

Nothing else seemed to matter as the hours, as the days passed by, nothing but ride through dirt roads, between woods, by rivers, by villages, cities, the edge of hills, splendorous lakes, fields, towns and forests that announced their entrance into the American province. They only

made small stops for dinner, rest, breakfast and lunch, with hurry, with no words, no games, Feliciano couldn't even bring himself to sketch or play with Pookie. With Ludwig he only shared smiles and glances, enough to feel their unrest, but hoping that these silent gazes were enough to instill confidence, belief and strength. It was moments like those that made Feliciano wish that he could just let himself rest in their hand holding, in arms, in whatever closeness they could let themselves in to just forget for a while. Ludwig felt the same thing, but in the hurry, in his own reserve, he didn't dare reach, he only made sure that his horse ran dutifully by his, watching over him no matter how dangerous the terrain got.

As finally they had reached that eight day, after countless of views of hills and fields, an approaching wall of blue trees welcomed them from a high slope, a clear sign that had Lien raising her hand.

"This is it, the Bowman forest, it surrounds the entirety of the city, we just have to go across it until we meet with a stationed guard," she shouted to all, pulling on her horse's reigns and coming into a slow halt, all following the command to stop, to acknowledge and even admire what they were to pass through.

"Be slow and be attentive, we don't know what we might meet here. Stay on your guard and remain together," she advised lastly before they continued their thread, in an easy pace, almost silent, trying to blend in with the serenity of the forest, of the calm of the animals that lived and the simple rivers that flowed.

To Feliciano it seemed to go on endlessly, with no glimpse of populace, of towering new buildings or this castle that was written to be very similar to Berlin's. As they were going through an unmark route to avoid confrontation, they didn't meet with wayward farmhouses, lost travelers or even glimpses of this impressive wall, but fauna, beautiful ones with splendorous flowers that tempted Feliciano to pick, to decorate his hair, the horses or mend into their bags.

By midday, they finally stopped by the running of a brook, a nice cleared patch to rest by and have lunch. They were hungry and thought no wrong of having something to sate them for a small moment.

"All right, whose turn is it to find blueberries?" Yong asked, already holding the basket.

"Oh, I think it's mine," Feliciano reminded.

"Then here you go. If you find anything else, like strawberries, definitely bring," Yong hoped as Feliciano, nodding in promise.

Feliciano was just about to head into the woods by himself to find some while the rest continued with getting their things to make this cooking as quick as they could, until he noticed Ludwig coming to join.

"The last time you went somewhere alone you almost got yourself spotted by spying Khaos's men. I can't let you go through another risk like that," Ludwig defended, already moving ahead and taking the lead for him. Feliciano smiled not minding, he really did feel assured

with his protection, one he had ultimate trust in and he knew would defend him against anything no matter what.

He kept Ludwig's pace the deeper they went, Ludwig assuring their spot, knowing well how they could return, while Feliciano kept his eyes open for any kind of sweet fruit, but at the moment it was rather dull, like everything just suddenly…died. It was odd, considering this was supposed to be a plentiful forest.

Ludwig moved the obstacle of a large bush slightly, only to stop once he noticed that below it there was only a cliff. He sighed disappointedly, they had to go back. He was about to say his findings to Feliciano, who was just reaching him when his eyes continued the extend of that bottom, to then find tents, people, occurrence…all dressed in the all too familiar dreadful black cloak. As soon as he realized, he took a strong hold of Feliciano, wrapping his arms strongly around him as well as placing his hand on his mouth. Feliciano fretted, worried and trembled to see what was going on. Ludwig pointed his face to the camp and Feliciano's eyes widened. Once Ludwig knew he understood what they were before, he let go, to take a better watch, trying to see what they were exactly doing, hoping he could overhear any plans. Feliciano joined in doing the same, but all he could spot was just normal activity of them taking strolls around the clearance, chatting, an occasional warrior sharpening his weapon, practicing by throwing at targets or slashing along in the air at an imaginary enemy.

"Come on," Ludwig whispered as he began his quiet standing.

"To what?" Feliciano questioned, still shaking with clear fear.

"We're going to tell the others."

With Ludwig and Feliciano's findings, they all rushed their lunch and then headed to the very location, spending the rest of what was left of the evening and of the early night watching, each with their own pair and their own hiding place, circling, ears perked and eyes attentive to anything that might reveal. Of course, Ludwig remained with Feliciano, both deciding to remain by the same bush where they had first spotted them, counting how many, the kind of weapons they had, the magic they practiced and anywhere in particular they reunited in and how.

They heard rustling and instantly prepared a blinding fire spell to start in their hands, in quite the amazing union despite not combining their magic.

"Relax, it's just us," Lei whispered as he showed himself along with Mei, both taking a near sitting and returning their gazes to the activities of the camp.

"Did you find anything out?" Feliciano asked.

"It's pretty much the same, but we managed to locate the leader's tent, as well as the meeting one, told Yong about it," Lei explained.

"And where is he?" Feliciano gazed around, finding him nowhere near.

“We don’t know, he just left, told us he was going to check from another spot,” Mei said with obvious worry for him.

No sooner Lien and Cheng arrived, just as unfruitful, taking their own sittings beside them, as agitated, as calculating, still awaiting the smallest hint of something.

“Why don’t we just leave this instant, arrive to the castle and tell them where they are?” Ludwig suggested.

“Without knowing what they’re going to do? We can’t risk losing this valuable information,” Lien said.

“We can’t sit around here doing nothing either,” Lei told her back.

“Let’s agree, if by midnight we haven’t found anything, we’ll get Yong and just arrive as quickly as we can to the castle and tell them what we know,” Cheng decided and they all concurred, then deciding to remain silent as they continued with their vigilance.

As the minutes passed of the same they had been watching for hours, Yong still didn’t appear and currently they were discussing about who was going to go get him, and then suddenly a dark cloaked figure approached them, all instantly panicked, preparing weapons, magic, fighting skills, ready to take him down in an easy instant.

“Hold it! It’s just me!” The figure removed the hoodie, to reveal Yong, smiling and waving a scroll in his hold as he neared.

They all took a synchronized sigh and rest, hiding their magic and weapons, only to send instant glares at him for scaring them.

“Why are you wearing that?” Lei asked, looking quite disgusted.

“You won’t believe how easy they have these hanging around, so I just took one to make it easier to sneak in.”

“You sneaked in!?” Lien was about ready to slap him.

“Relax, nobody noticed. You have to remember I took classes with master Schufen, and she was the best in interceding and blending,” he reminded as he neared, taking the whole cloak off and landing it uselessly on the floor, then beginning to open the scroll, making the space for all to see.

“They had a meeting just a bit earlier, repeating well the plan of attack for the day after tomorrow, I managed to even take one of their planning scrolls. You all have to see this,” he explained, his cousins feeling quite proud of his feet.

The scroll was completely opened, in it a well design of the wall encircling the large city, marked with all kinds of unintelligible drawings, but Yong knew enough to be able to describe.

“It’s worse than we thought. They have spies and soldiers in the walls. They made entryways they’ve had set for weeks already,” he pointed to the marks near certain posts, with arrows directing to those towers, surely meaning an invasion, spots in the internal part of the city to attack when it would be decided.

“A single signal and they will all, and I mean all,” he spun his fingers around the wall, to every soldier marked, “will start their sneaking, attack the guards without noticing, take control of each tower one by one, leave at least twelve men guarding each, and five to run, aid, attack any other guards that might try to stop them as they begin their attacks on the city with the young Sloane cannons, instantly, even if their biggest mission does not succeed.”

“And what is their biggest mission?” Lien asked, already fearful, shaking, one that the rest of the group shared in, the magnitude one that seemed to tower and tower the more closely they studied the map, to see and admit how calculated and well planned they had this.

Yong sighed, and to make it clear instantly to the ones who knew, he pointed to the center tower, the most marked, circled and notes of their language written to the side.

“Old Sloane,” Cheng identified, ultimate dread, one that instantaneously fell on the rest, biting their lips, their fingers, moving away, settling well with the storm that was coming.

“Um…what are these Sloanes?” Feliciano feared to ask, but Ludwig and him needed to know the full extent of this.

“Probably the most powerful cannons in the known world,” Mei declared in anguish.

“They were long ago created by a mix of elf humans to defend against the threats of the blackened decades,” Yong continued.

“They used an incredible amount of magic for this, as well as a nuclear energy the humans made.”

“They made a total of twenty five cannons, most of them small ones to defend against simpler threats, but then there was Old Sloane.”

“Old Sloane is the biggest and most dangerous of them all, with a capability to destroy the entire city in one blast if charged enough."

“This one was made for more powerful threats, for if Khaos arrived with one of his large armies or other forces that the writings don’t talk about.”

That seemed rather omniscient. What kind of other force was so large that they needed a cannon of such magnitude? But now was not the time to question this, not when this new kind of threat was present.

“It’s the most protected tower, with the strongest guards of the kingdom, not even the King, Queen and Jack are allowed unless they have special permissions which deem they know how the cannon works and its capability.”

“Once they rid of all the guards in all the towers, they plan to start circling with their large numbers until they reach the center, with enough power to get rid of those guards and take it to their control,” Yong returned to explain.

“And there goes Washington,” Lei grimly said.

“Then we can’t just sit here and let it happen. We have to get to the castle immediately with this!” Feliciano wanted to rush, already moving away, deciding that they should head to their horses that instant, but nobody dared to, apparently there was something Yong hadn’t told them yet.

“Yeah…about that,” he started, “you see, at the south gates of the city, where were supposed to enter through, they already have about four men waiting for your arrival, prepared for your capture, and especially since we didn’t go through the Wu Si Lu route, they sent heavier men determined to truly get you both this time.”

“Then we’ll just take another gate!”

“They did the same with the other ones. Face it, no matter where we go, one of Khaos’s men will be there to have our heads ready.”

And Feliciano dropped, fearful and shaking, groaning along with the rest, pacing, thinking about what they were supposed to do now.

“The-there, there has to be something we can do,” Lien wanted to hope as she took the scroll, hoping to find some clear weakness, some idea between the lines as the rest simply plopped down along with Feliciano, readying themselves to face their death as well as a breaking city.

“Then what are we supposed to do? Just stay here?” Feliciano was disappointed, with tears verging in his eyes, outmost misery coloring him.

“Well…we could just go through the gates and somehow defeat these guys, I mean, we have tomorrow, the attack is not until the day after,” Lei suggested.

“And risk getting one of us killed when they start shooting at us with the young Sloanes, running through the city, endangering other people?”

“Despite the date they settled, it all honestly depends on a signal. If they see us barging in like that, they’ll surely kick start it, making it easier to catch us in the mess.”

“I saw the guys they sent. Pretty intimidating and taller than most of us."

“Can’t be as much as Ludwig.”

As they went on with different suggestions. Ludwig’s mention had Feliciano gazing to him, wondering what he would be feeling about all this, but instead he kept his gaze still on the camp, Feliciano knew with thought, with plotting, tapping away at one of the branches in a bush as an idea connected and was built in his head. Feliciano stared at him for the longest while, all what Ludwig needed to think, until it was clear, until he could tell them.

“What if we stop them ourselves?” He suddenly said, breaking the throwing of words the rest of the group was participating in, stopping instantly to truly take in what the arising Hearts King just said.

“That would be insane and suicidal,” Lei had no problem with admitting.

“Do you have any idea how many men they have for this,” Yong reminded.

“We’re just seven,” Lien pointed.

“Not just. You did say you are one of the best groups the Spadian High Protection Squadron has to offer. In my time with you all, I’ve learned you have powerful and skillful abilities that have worked for you well to this day, no matter your past missions, despite most of you being so young,” he acknowledged, which actually brought proud and strengthening smiles to them.

“You forget that I am a coming King, with power that I’m sure most of these men would wish to possess, and then we have Feliciano,” he finally turned to him, serious but yet with a belief that brought him with a new kind of life. “The first Italian queen since August. You all don’t understand the kind of meaning that has to our kingdom. He’s powerful, a vast amount of magic that is yet still a mystery to even those in our kingdom. We can use it, we can interfere.” He returned his gaze back to the camp, the idea solidifying more and more in his head, until he was confident, until he could already see them running in his head.

“What exactly do you have in mind?” Lei asked.

Ludwig really hoped they could confide in this idea, that they could have enough trust, and more importantly, confidence to be a part of it.

“We have the plans, we know where they’re going to enter and how they’re going to work. Why don’t we just enter the same way and stop them?”

“Wha-what-what?” Lien trembled.

“We’ll sneak in ourselves at different assigned points. I’ll tell you how you can identify whose a Khaos’s men. To those who are real guards, tell them, as conspicuously, prepare them, spread the news singularly, catch them off guard themselves and capture them. If were successful, they won’t get near any canons,” he prepared, in seriousness and devotion that they all easily nodded and found themselves obeying to.

“You do know there are twenty five towers, all at different parts of the city,” Lei wanted to point.

“All these guards must have a sort of signal to communicate, we just have to spread what’s happening as best as we can, attack, defend, and fight,” Ludwig determined, finally turning to them, away from the camp.

“Ludwig this is…really risky, it could easily go wrong. We’re only seven and I don’t think strong enough to deal with something of such magnitude,” Mei excused doubtfully.

“We can and we will. We’re just as powerful as them. Besides, it’s better to try and do something than just stand here and let it happen, no matter what might happen to us, we’re talking about a million lives here.” He moved forward, direction to their camp.

“If you’re certain, then please, tell us what we should do,” Cheng wanted to join, standing just as strongly and proud as Ludwig. It was the same lead everyone followed, even Feliciano, but with the still evident fear coating his face. Ludwig understood it and there was no shame in it, the rest surely felt the same, but they felt a duty with it and thus they had to let it rest, had to just go and risk it when there was a chance of stopping and saving.

“Let’s go back to the camp, we have to start preparing immediately,” Ludwig commanded.

And so they all returned, Ludwig taking the scroll, a pen and planning what they would do.

Each would have to work alone, even Feliciano, but Ludwig made sure to keep him closest to his own base tower, giving him a mission that he knew he could deal by himself. If anything there was the emergency spell, and he had no problem with going towards him if it worsens. He detailed how they should send messages from afar, how they could convince the actual guards, who would be Khaos’s men (“Remember, the air around them feels dead”), how to defend the canons, what to do if one got captured and a way to call the castle so they could send immediate aid for when things got too hectic and obvious.

After he finished, after he made sure that everybody understood what they were to do, he sent them all to sleep, saying that he would wake them up early the next day to start their training and test whatever they knew that could help for this.

No one was left absent that morning, even Feliciano was quickly pushed into drills, into learning fighting skills, defenses, new tricks of magic, new combining spells between him and Ludwig, despite his groaning, despite his pain, despite if he was actually punched and thrown. He had to learn to deal with the pain, to bring out harsher maneuvers, he was going to be dealing with something much worst, alone, and Ludwig truly wanted him at the best he could pull at the moment, to not be afraid to use the extent of his power as long as he didn’t use it for their combination. As a way to message each other, they learned a combination spell in which they could conjure small images in their arms, for both to see and send themselves codes with no matter the distance they would have to take.

They spent their dinner teaching each other what a butterfly meant, a potato, a tomato, one of Pookie, a heart, a spade and finally a star.

They would start their mission early, before it was decided by Khaos’s men, with enough time to get to the walls, sneak in themselves, warn and prepare the guards with sufficient time. As so, Ludwig suggested it was best they rested after a hard day of training. They were tired, exhausted and they would need even more energy for the next day.

As Ludwig and Feliciano prepared their bags, deciding what to bring with them and what to leave behind in a hidden spot in the forest, Ludwig came into contact with his sword, his own kingdom sword, a sure gift to every King, one of his most powerful weapons, created for him by Heart’s smiths, blessed with magic and beauty, deserving to a coming ruler as himself.

Despite everything that had happened throughout the journey, this was really the first time he took it out from its protective cloth, laying his eyes on its shine, its red, white, and gold, its intricacy and rich design in the pommel, grip, and guard, made to symbolize the soul of a phoenix, a red fire wolf and a St. Mark Lion, kingdom animals of Hearts.

It was really artistic for something that was meant to be wielded in battle, to avenge and kill.

“You’re going to use it, right?” Feliciano questioned after soothing Pookie enough to rest by his sleeping mat.

It wasn’t the first time Feliciano had seen Ludwig’s sword. He’d seen him use it in training back at the castle or at display in the king’s study room. It really was beautiful, always enchanting, tempting to grab and wield its splendorous design, to move in action and grace.

“No,” Ludwig answered, putting it back in its dark cloth, into the bag that was meant to stay hidden.

“But…we might need it for tomorrow, are you sure?”

“I am.”

Ludwig turned away from him, taking his rest upon his own mat, eyes distant, although occasionally going back to the bag he knew it rested, reminding him of his resolve, the very item seeming to whisper it continuously.

“It’s not its fight yet.”

Chapter 42

Chapter Notes

This is a pretty long chapter, hope you enjoy!

As soon as the sun dawned, each was off in their own direction to their assigned tower. Only Ludwig and Feliciano rode off together, and it was mostly because the arising king wanted to make sure that his arising queen would arrive safely. Pookie was left behind to stay protected at the hidden grove, watching over the things they kept in his watch, Feliciano promising to come fetch him once everything was done.

After minutes of riding, the city finally came into view, all impressively contained behind the preparation of a shining silver wall, with symbols of the kingdom and unique towers standing to watch over all the kinds of rises in the city. Feliciano could only spot some buildings standing tall, the castle but a blur from their still far off distance. The site was quite a beauty, shinning along in blue with the vicinity of its own protective forest, densely populated, with lively activity as it was expected each and every day, every person living to its routine, to the countless the city had to offer, and Ludwig and Feliciano were determined to save it from the danger they were not expecting.

Feliciano's assigned base tower was a small one, overlooking a quite tranquil area of small buildings hiding under the shadows of their blue trees, paved stone roads where children played and teachers watched well over them. Feliciano couldn't believe that these Khaos's men would be so evil as to attack innocent unaware children, enjoying from sunny weather and being welcomed into their new day of activities.

They stopped their horses by an area they wouldn't be spotted, mending well behind trees, bushes, and rocks, Feliciano taking his time to gaze where he was going to work, familiarizing, spotting the next two towers off into other parts of the city, the passage between them ones he knew he could easily run upon to warn.

"Are you ready?" Ludwig asked him.

Feliciano trembled with the reigns still in his hands, with constant deep sighs that only seemed to make him more aware of the situation, to only worsen how his body moved along with those breaths. Ludwig could obviously tell he was afraid, nervous, hesitant to even touch the ground.

"I have to, don't I? We all depend on each other for this to work." With a self-push he dismounted, moving the horse away, free if it wanted to be, it was better that it ran off from whatever was to occur.

“I know you’re scared about this… I know you would rather not deal with something like this, never in any part of your ruling, but the reality is that sometimes we can’t avoid it, and they have to happen if something needs to be accomplished. We’re counting on you. Remember, I’m only one tower away, if anything happens, you know what to do, we have the codes.”

Feliciano nodded, preparing his cloak, his footing to the direction he needed to take. “I will do my best,” he assured, with a promise in his eyes that caused Ludwig a warm smile on his lips. From the height of his own horse, he let his hand fall, to caress at the side of Feliciano’s face, taking the softness of skin and hair, showing him his faith and belief. It was so comforting to Feliciano, who let himself rub against that hold, closing his eyes and near to resting. He placed one last dear kiss on the palm of Ludwig’s hand, one last hold of his own, a strong smile, and he departed, forward to the opening that was available.

Once Ludwig saw that he found the entrance, only covered by makeshift wood that Feliciano easily moved apart, he turned his horse away and departed to his own assigned tower. Feliciano breathed out blessing spells under his breath for his protection, before he finally scrunched through the small space, trying to make his steps as silent as possible through the tunnel, reaching an end, a wall he could easily remove with a spell, to an opening of only tables with different kinds of weapons, papers, charms, and bags, the walls hanging with bulletin boards, certifications, uniforms and armors. All right, he was finally inside, now to find a true guard and hope that he wouldn’t meet first with a hidden Khaos’s men.

Feliciano gazed around, no presence to spot, no guard, standing or approaching. He let himself enter completely, heading to the stairs, every step he took upward cautious with a peek, only continuing onward if he didn’t spot anything. He passed by a lighting blue orb in the wall, a window that showed once again to the children playing, and finally he spotted someone. A guard, with proper uniform, gazing over the area, making sure no threat lingered, letting himself smile at whatever occurrence the children did. Feliciano felt no malice. A look around showed no presence of anything dying. He was a true guard and it was the one he decided he had to approach and warn first. He took extra glances, making sure that he was alone in the area before he began to whistle, low enough for only him to hear. He really did not need to get the attention of others, especially if he didn’t know they would be of Khaos or not.

“Y-your- your highness?” He instantly recognized the arising queen of Hearts. All the guards at the wall had been sent pictures for them to recognize for their soon arrival. Yet, what was he doing here? The closest entrance was the east gate and they were expected to enter through the south.

Feliciano motioned him to come closer and he obeyed, enough for their whispers to only be heard between each other. “I know this all looks crazy right now, but you must listen to me, the city is in terrible danger. Soon enough about fourteen of Khaos’s men are about to storm into this tower, take control of the Sloane here and use it to attack the city.”

The real panic in his eyes, even in the way he trembled was enough sincerity for the guard to believe. “Your highness, how are they going to enter? How did you enter yourself? How did you find out about this?”

“A member in our group from our travel here sneaked into their camp and got one of their planning scrolls, we found out about tunnels they had been working to each tower for weeks. Each of us are coming in to warn and prepare. We also found out that they sent spies and some of the guards might not be real ones. Please, how many guards are positioned in this tower?”

“We’re only six right now. This is not a very eventful area,” he dreaded.

“Where are they?”

“Two are by the canon, another one is here in this floor with me, the others are walking along the ramp of the wall giving their usual rounds.”

“Do you have any idea on who could be a spy?”

“Come with me, I’m not entirely sure.”

He hid the arising Queen behind his tall stature, moving him safely forward until he gazed to the man he shared this floor with, who was gazing over to one of the windows that showed the outside forest, sure and pointed. Feliciano felt no deathly air or evil stare. Trusting, he let himself show, moving away from the guard’s back, of course earning a surprised gasp from the other. He was about to bow and utter his ‘your highness’ when both shushed him, they had to be silent with this inspection.

The guard pointed to the spinning stairs that lead to the platform where the cannon lay. He moved in front, Feliciano behind, until they were given a good opening of the two standing guards without having to clearly show themselves. One of them seemed completely calm, gazing to the views of the city, then there was the other one, heavy intent in his eyes, seeming uncomfortable in the uniform he wore, and with Feliciano’s closer inspection, he noticed many of the stones around him rotting to darkness. Feliciano pointed for the guard, to let him know one of them was a Khaos, to the clear signs that showed it, before he slowly moved them back to the floor, the guard letting the other know of their discovery, quickly plotting a way to deal with this.

While they spoke, Feliciano gazed to the opening that led to the light of the morning, easily spotting the two guards that rounded. One of them had to be the second. He spoke to the two guards, in silent whispers telling them of the plan Ludwig had given him to capture the both of them. They called the true ones, with Feliciano’s help explaining the situation, until they were sure of the quick plan they had to fulfill. Both, after going back to their position, began their easing, close enough, with prepared skills, magic and bounds to swiftly make their attack, until both the intruders were tied in the rope that cut any chance of magic to pass. They were thrown in a corner of the tower, grimacing, trying to fight their way out, calling insults and shouting, but the four guards and Feliciano remained uncaring to it, now gazing to the arising Queen on what should be done next.

“Can you call more guards?”

“Of course, there are many in the area that can come.”

“Perfect, about twenty would do, if more, even better. Fourteen will be coming through the tunnel I already showed Mr. Lungu, keep extra precautions on the cannon.”

“Should we warn the other towers?” One asked.

“Should we send a message to the castle?” Another.

“I’ll make sure of warning the next towers and preparing them, we can’t call too much attention without knowing what these spies are willing to do to stop the guards. If you can send someone to message the castle, that be great, but make sure they don’t attract too much attention.”

“Will do,” they all saluted.

One stayed keeping watch on the prisoners, another on the canon, one went to find other guards to help for the invasion, the other to find a messenger to send to the castle. Feliciano wished them luck before running down the ramp to the next tower, to commence the same all over again. Luckily the two guards he met on the ramp were both true ones, to which he quickly explained the situation and they were quick to find them, to capture them, find more guards in the area and prepare for the more that were to come through the tunnel below.

Finally, it was only after this one that he should meet with Ludwig, so without a care, without a second thought, he ran along. He wanted to be with him, he wanted to help him with the next towers, they had to be there for each other, make sure they would be safe. As Ludwig would not let anything happen to Feliciano, Feliciano wouldn’t dare let something happen to Ludwig. He forgot about the guards that were walking along the ramp, it was like the only one that was coming didn’t even exist, he was just wanted to get there, he just wanted to see Ludwig safe, having fulfilled the towers he needed to do for now.

“Feliciano!” He recognized his call, from the top, from surely the canon room, an ultimate panic in his every being that Feliciano was sure would throw him from the heights in his desperation. It was the call that had him realizing, looking frontal, a man, darkening, even with his blue Spadian uniform, pointing a very dark sword towards him, crafted unlike anything Feliciano had seen, jagged, glowing in eerie darkness, only something that would be in the cruelty of a man of Khaos. He came forward, running and ready to inflict whatever was necessary to stop the arising Queen. Feliciano was too determined, to forward in wanting to reach his arising King, so without even truly thinking about it, as if it was a calling of his soul, he began a spell, one he had never tested before, never seen on a book, never even heard of. A ray of fire, spark and even plasma appeared from his hold, a strengthening jet that shot quicker than even the fastest arrow. It hit the target on point, he was gone in a matter of seconds, Feliciano used his weight to jump over him as he fell and used the speed of his push to make his leaping quicker. The guards from the next tower were left in impression, for Ludwig to move out under their gazes, to run towards him and accept Feliciano’s jump into his arms as soon as he reached the entrance of the tower.

Of all the moments to share such a deepening embrace, such a tight hold, meant, strong and even powerful. When was the last time they hugged like this? When was the last time their arms could wrap around each other with such trust, belief and even love?

“You made it,” Ludwig managed a smile.

“I had to, I couldn’t let you do this alone,” Feliciano breathed into his chest, a loyalty that made Ludwig want to lock him more into this engulfing, forgetting towers, attacks and even Khaos’s men. It was the distraction one of these men needed, approaching with a knife sharpened to a shine, intent on piercing and stopping. Ludwig’s fist was quicker, and without having to let go of Feliciano or even turn around, he smashed his head downwards, gave him a kick straight to the groin, then to his stomach and he was on the ground without a single sweat from Ludwig’s brow. His attention was quickly brought back to the loving embrace, both smiling and swaying into the peace of their hold.

Like in the rest of the towers, the prisoners were taken, bound with anti-magic rope and brought to a corner, the guards being told the complete information, working on getting more soldiers and preparing themselves for the coming invasion. Once this tower was secure, Ludwig and Feliciano moved together to the next Ludwig hadn’t dealt with, two towers away, down the ramp, meeting with one of the rounding soldiers, a clear Khaos, approaching them ready to attack.

With an arising King and Queen together, he didn’t stand a chance.

They both used a fire jet combination spell, easily bringing him to submission, carrying him forward to the tower. The other spy had seen the ordeal from the canon room, coming down to avenge, unexpected to the guards that didn’t know anything yet. He was about ready to attack them with the fierceness of a spear, but with Ludwig’s strength, Feliciano’s agility, they physically beat him until he was in the same state as the one they burned. The guards, who were dumbfounded by the situation, were left in stilling shock as Ludwig and Feliciano explained while they bounded both the men. The typical scurrying to protect the canons, get extra guards and soldiers and make sure they were prepared before Ludwig and Feliciano headed off to the next tower.

The eastern gate was coming, the largest tower in the area, they were sure to meet with Cheng, who, if things went as planned, had already finished warning and preparing his own assigned towers. They ran with the eagerness, the exhaustion starting to get to them, but both made sure to keep each other going, with tightened grasps, a smile, or a gaze to the active city, reminding them of what they had to protect and defend.

So far no signs were shown by the others, which meant things must be going as planned, surely they were missing very few towers to warn, there was a chance, they could do this.

Shouts and war cries, swarming, reaching, beneath the tunnels, into the towers, into the wall. As Ludwig and Feliciano stopped and gazed to the side, they saw the large numbers of black cloaks appearing from the forest, starting their invasion through the tunnels. They were confident the other towers could defend themselves, but…they hadn’t reached the eastern gate yet! No, they couldn’t leave such a big entrance, there were still spies in there, they could still reach the canon. They hurried, they tried to move forward as fast as they could, but it was too late, one of the spies was quick enough to reach the cannon, setting eyes on the approaching royals. He aimed and the first boom of the attack sounded. They jumped away just in time, landing in strong thuds against the ground, covering their heads from the flying debris, their ears from the large explosion that tore to pieces a proud part of the wall, right

next to a choir school. They heard shouts, screams, shuffling of people running away, but it seemed like no one had been hurt…for now.

After Ludwig and Feliciano eased their breaths, turning around to see the full damage, they met with smoke arising into the air, the bridge back to the tower they just left turned to nothing, all but rocks and stones tumbling into the city and forest.

They couldn't remain laying there for long, they stood, they had to quicken before they did any other damage.

When they arrived to the tower, preparing the strongest of their magic to attack, they were surprised to find guards and soldiers, more than enough to battle on with the Khaos that were just entering. Distracted they were in their physical lounges, in the clash of weapons, in the throes of magic that Ludwig and Feliciano could easily pass by, wanting to deal with who was in the canon room.

When they reached the upward platform, they arrived just in time to see the Khaos fall to a limp on the floor, having just been handed with a single staff, by a person adorned in the most prestigious blue of the kingdom.

"Arthur!" Feliciano shouted ecstatically.

"Not the way I would have preferred to have you entering the capital city, but I'm glad to see you both! Welcome to Washington!"

It was in that very moment that they heard a sudden crash down below, worrying until someone shouted: "Everything is going well, your majesty!" Arthur desperately wanted to hope so.

Ludwig stood by the stairs, ready to face any Khaos that would want to climb, while Arthur and Feliciano dealt with bounding the defeated Khaos in the room, as well as trying to heal to the best they could one of the fallen guards, who was exhausted on the floor, having dealt with a powerful blow to the head and a kick to his stomach, suffering other bruises and magic burns on his body.

Leaving other soldiers to watch over the canons, they helped the guard down until they reached the base of the tower and gate, where now the rest of the men fought on by the forest, capturing and weakening the Khaos. They brought the wounded man to a carriage that could take him to the hospital to rest and properly heal.

"All kind of messengers arrived to the castle explaining what was happening. We immediately began sending our best soldiers and guards to help. After hearing you two were at the walls yourselves, Alfred and I decided to fight and help along as well," Arthur explained, the carriage moving hurriedly away while he led them both back to the tower.

"So Alfred is here too?" Feliciano questioned, looking around hoping to meet him.

"Went to help with the western gate, he already met with Lei." He took out his pocket watch, revealing several codes and messages instead of the time. "For now they're doing all right.

We agreed that once we secured the few missing towers, we would all meet at the center tower, the north gate, excruciatingly important that we reach right now."

Both Ludwig and Feliciano nodded, and thus the three of them ran the bridges and ramps. They met up with Cheng in one of the next towers, helping him as well as the guards and soldiers with the invasion, catching many and sending more to capture those who ran to the forest in scared defeat. After so, they hurried on, with clear goal to reach the northern gate on time.

Ludwig and Feliciano recalled that Yong was the one in charge of dealing with it, confident that he was there, that he had subsided, that the guards believed him, that they rid of the fakes and were now keeping the canon secured and pushing along the invasion like the rest.

Even with their determined running, they couldn't ignore the passing of the city, watching as now the citizens worried, as they crowded, staring on with worry, many surely thinking about evacuating or finding whatever safe spot they could in their own homes and buildings. It was then that they noticed the far side of the city, the opposite side of the wall, the symbol of a baby blue bird firing up into the heights, just enough for the message to send, for Cheng, Ludwig and Feliciano to spot.

Oh no…they ran on with clear panic in their expressions, one Arthur noticed, spreading even to him, sending a questioning look to the symbol.

"What's happening?" Arthur asked, not for a moment stopping their haste.

"It's Mei and Lien, one of the spies barricaded the entrance to the canon room in the tower they just reached. They can't get in," Cheng informed.

"I'll send a message to Alfred, he's closer and I'm sure he can send backup." Arthur took out his watch ready to send the message, but he was halted with a crash, a boom, a burning, the item flying from his hold, landing on the ground like he did, coughing and trying to clear the cloud and heavy dusk with a fanning of his hand.

It was burning, it was heavy, Ludwig had to use a wind spell to clear their air, for them to notice all kinds of stones and pieces lying around them, a part of the wall destroyed, only inches away from them. Arthur gazed to the distance, knowing that it came from the very tower Mei and Lien sent their message from, the barricaded canon. Of course they would instantly set it to work and aim for them while they had the chance. They had to move quick, they couldn't stall, another shot could be given, they still had to reach the northern gate.

Arthur and Cheng stood ready to run, but as they turned to Ludwig and Feliciano hoping that they would be just as prepared, they noticed Feliciano was still kneeled on the ground, hunching, clutching to his limp arm that they noticed dripped blood to the floor, the fabric of his sleeve drenched in red. His entire body whimpered in groans and cringes, filled with pain and fainting feelings.

"Ludwig…Ludwig…" he called, too weakened, too hurt to even sit up straight.

The arising King came close and finally saw, noticing that Feliciano had been the closest to the explosion, the blow one that his arm and back must have taken harshly. He quickly kneeled beside him, even with the panic, even with the utter breaking in his expression, managing to hold him close, uncaring to the blood that now drenched on him, easing what he could desperately, seeing that what he tried to do was not working, bringing him as well difficult breathing.

“Feliciano, Feliciano, stay awake, stay with me here, we-we’ll manage, we’ll do something” he promised, he determined, even with the shake in his voice. He looked over to Arthur, expecting some sort of words of help, something to do that instant about this.

“We’re at a difficult spot, I don’t have any healers in this area,” Arthur had to dreadfully admit.

“We can’t just leave him like this,” Ludwig quickly angered, with a growl, vengeance ready to inflict even on the Queen of Spades if it impended safety to Feliciano.

“Calm down! We’re in the middle of an invasion, we’re all stressed enough and I don’t want it getting worst. We should do our best to serve the city and the kingdom, and right now our duty is reaching the northern, gate wounded or not, and I cannot risk the entire population for a fallen one. You’ll either have to stay in the tower waiting for help or continue on despite.”

Ludwig hated the idea of having to stay behind when he should be fighting along and aiding, but he couldn’t stand the greying in Feliciano’s features, his wavering, the blood that kept oozing, life being slowly drained from his glowing and vivacity. No, he wanted his safety more than anything, and he would bring it to him somehow, even in the mess they were in, he wouldn’t dare let him disappear like this in his arms.

“Fine, fine, we’ll stay in the tower-” Ludwig began to accept, but Feliciano’s surviving hand rose weakly, halting his words.

“Lud-Ludwig, they-they need us,”

“Feliciano, you’re wounded heavily. If we go any further you’ll get worst, I’m sure Arthur and the rest will manage."

“No, no.” It strained him more to say the words, the raised hand now falling to caress at Ludwig’s face. “I’ll manage, j-just carry me and I’ll still try-try what I can."

“Feliciano, you can’t speak properly, you can’t even stay awake."

“Cheng!” Feliciano managed to weakly call, the other approaching, careful, as if his breath could only tumble him more in his predicament.

“You told use once you knew-knew the most healing techniques in the group. Can you try to he-heal me while we run?” Feliciano suggested.

“Feliciano, this is a big and strong wound, any more movements can worsen it. You’ll need more than me to ail it… but I can work on it somehow, it just won’t be that easy while we’re

all moving."

"The-then start, and let's, let's-" heavy breaths, reaching for new ones that came harder, "-go, please, we can't stop. I don't want us just sitting in a tower doing nothing, I-I want to help, I-I want to do so-something." He was too determined to deny, and although the worry, the concerns, even the lingering threats of what could happen with Feliciano already injured like this, they still had to accept, they still had to go on.

His weight was easy for Ludwig to carry in his arms, with a dear hold that wouldn't let a part of him fall, cradled in the most potent protection. Cheng kept his hands on Feliciano's wounds, starting the spells, a glow under his hands that tried to do its work while they ran along the bridge, the ramps, through towers fighting on, occasionally helping if things got out of hand.

Alfred messaged Arthur about taking down the barricaded canon, how Lien and Mei helped along in defeating those that tried to invade that tower, keeping it secured enough for the four of them to make their own run to the northern gate with more men on ground approaching as well.

They all could finally see the gates from their distances, quite a immensity that made it hard to ignore, that intimidated, made them fear for what was going on in that largeness. They could see all kinds of dark cloaked figures approaching, from ground, from the far off ramps and bridges, aided by the escaped spies that were dressed still in the blue uniforms, talking, and plotting. Yong was still nowhere to be found, and it only brought them more agitation, more pierced gazes trying to find him, trying to see a way that the center tower was defending itself well.

"Guys, guys, guys!" They heard the familiar shout, a person finally coming close to them from the next nearing tower, waving frantically, clear panic in his eyes.

"Yong! What happened?" Ludwig demanded.

"Okay, so…I fucked up!"

"What happened?" Arthur shouted, wanting instant answers.

"One of the spies hid himself very well, I saw nothing, he looked like any other guard, he was the first one I met so I Instantly told him what we had planned. He told me he was going to deal with the rest himself so I just left to help with the next tower. Now I found out that he actually killed several of the guards in there, he barricaded all entrances, he's messaging for more to arrive and he's getting them all in through the tunnel, trying to stop any of the guards, trying to get into the canon room," Yong dreaded.

"We have more than strong enough men and women defending that canon, I'm sure they can hold on, but we must hurry even more," Arthur fastened them all, now the five moving along together.

Yong helped Cheng with the healing, both their union creating enough color to be brought to Feliciano, for his eyes to flutter with more life. Although blood dwindled, still continuing to

ooze, to sting, at least most of the cuts were slowly being shut and perhaps they could even let him run if it didn't hurt him too much, but Ludwig was not willing to take any chances.

Soon enough they were finally before the large rubble that blocked their entrance, some men were still fighting with Khaos who were trying to get in, others trying to remove as much as they could from the debris, but other stones kept falling, Khaos's men managed to come outside and battle on, impending more of their digging and entering. The rest prepared their weapons, their magic, ready on to attack, to create that opening before they reached the Old Sloane.

"I'm sorry Feliciano, but I can't let you come," Ludwig told him, bringing him to a spot in a near lookout tower, to be protected by two guards who had no problem with offering.

"No, no, I have to go," Feliciano still begged, but his body was still weak, the reach of his hand paining, he couldn't even sit up correctly.

"Feliciano, please, just stay here, you've already done more than enough, let us handle this." He took one last caress of his face, with promise, those shining amber eyes believing in that strength that he gave him.

Feliciano reluctantly nodded, having to make himself comfortable in the spot he lay, still preparing magic for if anything unexpected happened. Ludwig took out a dagger, infusing some of his own magic with it before he stood, only to be stopped by the harsh grip of Feliciano's hands.

"Please be safe, I won't stop giving you blessing spells."

"Save that energy for you, Feliciano. I'll be fine." He gave him one last reassuring grip of their hands before he dived into the frenzy, into the attack, into the swinging, into the beating and into the creation of openings, for the chance, for the hope.

Feliciano couldn't see anything, all he had were the expressions of the guards who kept watch in this tower, who gazed on, who conversed in a language Feliciano couldn't understand, commenting surely on what they were doing, what was happening, one even left seeing that they needed more aid. Now Feliciano depended on the sounds of screams, he didn't know from which side, on clashes of swords, of booms of magic, of thrown debris, shouts of information, of the situation in other towers, how another was killed inside the Northernmost gate. He couldn't hold his whimper, he couldn't hold the tears from falling with his outmost worry, for the lives of those lost in the hands of people so horrible, and all he was doing, while the rest fought on, was just sit there uselessly, crying, cringing, without even getting to see what was happening.

"Cheng! Cheng! Are you okay?"

"What do you mean Alfred is hurt?"

"They took down one of the guards keeping the canon. There's only four of them left against seven!"

“Ludwig, be careful!”

He had to see, he had to see!

Although it hurt, he managed to take a hold of the wall, pushing himself up, his left arm still fallen in a limp but his right arm was enough to haul him, enough to bring him to the opening, to finally see the stage of what was going on.

Fallen people on the ground, those continuing battle, he could see tears in the verge of Arthur’s eyes as he tried to bring down a Khaos, fighting on with only the assistance of his staff, Yong helping Cheng from his own serious pain, even after he defeated one, and there was Ludwig, fighting on two of Khaos’s men, with punches, with slices of his dagger, fire spells and even piercing ice ones, trying to keep an opening, trying for it to be enough for them to get their entrance.

“Ludwig…” Feliciano called, as if it was enough to help him, to bring down those evil men that only wished the worst for him.

“Ludwig…” he called again as he saw him loose the grip of his dagger, letting it fall to the ground, instead focusing on attacking with the force of his arms and legs.

“Ludwig…” These men were strong, as robust as he, they gave their own strengthening blows. Ludwig was enough times left out of air, stumbling, blood falling from the side of his face, and yet he still went on, letting the bruises arrive if it meant entrance, if meant saving.

“Ludwig,” Feliciano whimpered, his own tears beginning to cloud his vision, all the mess, all the turmoil hazed into one vision of hopelessness and failing.

“If something happened to Alfred, I swear!”

“I’m sure Mei is doing what she can!”

“One of the towers has received too many sudden men, they’re defeating them, they might get to the canon.”

No, no, no, Feliciano’s hands gripped on the floor as he maintained on his knees, as the ancient stone was decorated in the wetness of the tears that escaped.

One fall, a familiar breathing being lost, coughing, one approaching man with a long sword, an evil maniacal laugh, ecstatic over the piercing kill he was to create on the precious arising king of hearts. Ludwig couldn’t escape, the man had a foot on his chest, pushing, leaving less and less space for air to pass or for a movement to let him stop.

“Ludwig, Ludwig…” A lunge, an approach, a panic, a lightening, a meet. “LUDWIG!”

The scream was potent enough to blow, to go along with the large crack, with the sudden tremble of the ground. The wind, the city, even time seemed to stop as power rose, as the entire wall began to tear itself apart, every piece, every tower, every symbol, men, weapon, going up into the air. Every useless part was disintegrated, pieces began to fall on enemies, some began to hold tight to their nearest person as stones, small or ginormous, flew above,

under or even beside them, sending their aim to every spy, every cloaked men. The guards and the rest could do nothing, just as those in the city, who stopped all completely to watch this phenomenon, in gasp, in wonder, in terror, clutching to their own tightly, afraid, but hoping, hoping this could aid somehow.

The entire wall, all its radius, immensity and weigh floated up in the air, all in the control of one person, all in his power and magnitude.

“Wha-what is this?” Yong asked in panic, floating along in his own piece still holding to Cheng.

“What the hell is going on?” Arthur tried to find a quick answer.

Ludwig, who finally managed to stand, although still tumbling, still hurting, blood falling down his face, searched for Feliciano, and when his eyes landed on him, he saw him still sitting in his place by the tower, his area still grounded, unaffected. He glowed…in the same strange marks, leaking the potent of an extreme power that helped him stand, that made him walk along, unaffected by the force he created, not when he had a mission.

“Feliciano…it’s Feliciano…he’s doing this!” Ludwig realized, shouting it to all.

Their eyes instantly found him, curious for an explanation, but all he showed were those weird markings and nothing else to make clear.

“How…how is he doing this?” Arthur shouted back rather fearful.

Feliciano was walking proudly, with finesse, jumping along the pieces that formed before him, uncaring to all, not when he finally reached the tower that floated along with the rest. He passed by those true guards who were shaking, holding to anything to keep themselves grounded while the gate and tower seemed about ready to shoot into the heights of the sky. Feliciano moved along in familiarity, in quite a cool, up the tearing stairs and unto the canon room.

The true guards tried to hold themselves from pieces on the floor, the heaviness too strong to even let them sit up or stand, and with Feliciano’s presence, the heightening power around him, it was much worst.

He let them deal how they could, reaching instead to the Khaos that held on to a level of the Old Sloane, a cannon as large as he expected, crafted even wonderfully to show its power, its level of destruction, decorated in jewels, artistry with crystal fires in silvers and blues. It was honestly quite a beauty.

From the light that circled around the weapon, the Khaos was trying to charge it to its full capacity and not even the presence of Feliciano’s danger, of the altitudes, of the crushing intensity, was enough to dispatch him.

“Move,” Feliciano commanded.

“No,” he decided, only pulling the level harsher, hoping it could somehow quicken the charge.

Feliciano didn’t do anything to move him...but his marks grew harsher in fire burning red, joining along with the glare in his eyes, an intensity that didn’t match with the descriptions of child-like, bubbly and sweet features they were told the arising queen of hearts held. While he stood stiff, even with the continuous movements of the wall, of all the flying debris he controlled around him, a sudden crashing came to add, a figure instantly moving from the dust to stand in fearsome strength over the Khaos. The St. Mark roared, a sound of immenseness, of ferocity, blinding, it shook the other until it was enough to lose his strength even with the holding of the lever. His body was about to hit the ground until Feliciano stopped him half way with the air of his power.…only to throw him much harsher to the opposite surface, the wall so weakened that parts flew off easily, diving him more into their crushing.

There was no other Khaos man in the area, they hadn’t survived the immense attack Feliciano had sent, and so without a moment to lose, he raised the level back to its original position, the charging instantly shutting down to nothing. In that very moment, with one last thanking smile to Pookie, his glow began to disappear, his magic dwindled, he fell to the ground and with him all the wall came back to the ground. A couple of holes, a couple of loose bricks, true guards dizzying and trying to find their footing, but the wall came down to its original state like it hadn’t been handled so easily as to let it float above the city.

No Khaos man, in no part of the wall, was standing, they either lay dead or unconscious on the floor, guards quickly managing what they could to take them, for either a burial or imprisonment. Many, from the far side of the city, gazed in unison to the north, with still deepening question with what just happened, wondering if any of the royals had to do with it.

Mei, Lei, Lien and Alfred crossed the now cleared bridge to the others, who were just taking their first steps after the whole ordeal, still dizzy, still trying to make sense. Alfred, although bloodied and bruised, still ran towards Arthur with spirit, unaffected by his own hurt, only wanting his husband’s embrace, the secureness to each that they were all right, before one another and the threat defeated. Mei, Lien, Yong, Cheng and Lei all came to their own group embrace, with confident smiles of a job well done, ecstatic for their safety and survival.

“That had to be…one of the most epic things…I’ve seen…in all my life,” Alfred commented, still blown and shaken, adrenaline pumping, part of him wishing he could see it all over again.

As they gazed to the center tower, completely cleared for any to enter, Ludwig took the first sprint forward after having found some stabilizing. The rest followed behind, proceeding through the broken gate, helping some of the guards who were still nauseous and shaking, aiding along with piling deceased bodies and any tying of still living Khaos’s men. Ludwig went on, knowing the rest could manage while he desperately went up the tower to the canon room, wanting to see Feliciano.

He lay comfortably on the ground, the pillow of a cape under his head, his body in rest, the current guards tending to him, bandaging the wound that still spewed blood, more after his height of power. Pookie’s large figure lay behind them, keeping a good watch, under his large

paw a surviving Khaos's men in his capture. He seemed to smile up to Ludwig in welcome, but he ignored it, instead rushing to Feliciano's side, bringing his body against him, the guards giving him the space and wish. Ludwig cradled him tightly, pushing away curls from his tranquil face behind his ear, caressing, taking every breath, every sudden movement he made in his sleep. He was fine, even with wounds and unconscious, he was more than fine, with chance, with survival and a hero to this city. Ludwig dared laugh in pride, to secure more his arms around him, hoping that in his dreams he could feel all this devotion, all this love, every belief that knew they could make this and with proof of the extend of Feliciano's power.

Chapter 43

I'll journey and see beyond the lines of our kingdom…

The voice sang, with a smile, a so familiar smile.

No sun, no rain to go against my strength…

It continued with images of a known hero.

But I don't need you to go so far…

The same marks seemed to palpitate in his mind.

And would you want me always by your side…

A shot, Feliciano didn't know from what, but he could feel the boom strongly.

I only want your arms around me…

There was an embrace.

I will keep it all in my heart…

Those stars.

If you accept to be mine, my King…

Curls, familiar curls.

All will join in your defend…

huh?

So the heavens will bless in your rest our perfect peace…

Too sudden, too many images that he couldn't even see properly in the blur, in the quickening, joining, blowing into his awake.

Feliciano's eyes widened, he took a deep gasp and suddenly he was sitting, meeting with many eyes, all as startled as he.

"Feliciano!" Ludwig called…he was right beside him, with his hands tightly on his arms, relief and worry mixed in his eyes as he stared down to him, trying to calm him from this sudden awakening.

"Whe-where am I?" Feliciano quickly wondered, not recognizing this room at all.

“You’re in the Spadian castle, in your room of stay,” Arthur told, who was standing with a group at the end of the bed.

Feliciano gazed around the blue room, encrusted with golden and silver designs like growing fauna in the walls, matching along with the rich furniture and items that decorated to its splendor. He rested on the largeness of a matching bed to the setting, with a canopy and carved symbols of the Spades kingdom.

“Feliciano…do you remember anything that just happened?” A new strange man asked. It took a while for Feliciano to recognize him as the Jack of Spades, obvious in his wear, matching along with the descriptions of a youthful face, long black hair styled in a tail, slanted dark eyes that held so much curiosity and concern.

“About…about the wall right?” He imagined and they all nodded.

“Yes, it’s…coming back now. I…did it right? Raised the entire wall like that?” He remembered the intensity that ran through his blood, the ultimate reach of power, how it all came so easy, only to crash down suddenly in a paining moment to his head…he suddenly remembered. “Oh my Aces! I-I’m so, so, so sorry for destroying the wall like that! I didn’t mean to! It just suddenly happened! I-I’ll do what I can to help fix it, stay for more weeks here if I have to!” He quickly extended his arms to take a grasp of Alfred’s hands, who had been near the bed for Feliciano to quickly show his desperation.

“Feli, Feli, relax, the wall is doing fine! What you did only harmed it slightly. We have the funds and people to fix it no problem, besides, it’s better than having Khaos’s men destroy it completely,” Alfred assured with a gentle smile.

“Did they all leave? We’re they all captured?” He still wondered.

“There’s none of them left, you stopped them all. They’re either dead or in prison,” Mei told.

“Re-really?…I-I killed them?” The thought didn’t weight easily on his head.

“Feliciano, they’re Khaos, they were going to destroy the entire city and kill everybody in it. You don’t need to feel any kind of pity,” Lien said.

“They deserved it,” Lei added.

“It’s just…it’s just…” he gripped on the sheets, a lot of questions still lingering in his head.

He got rid of those men…just like that, in a matter of swings, of throws, of great release. Then he wondered what all of that was? Was that really something he could actually do normally? A hidden part of his power that he just decided to release for the first time in that attack? It suddenly made him feel fearful of the kind of mysteries he held that he still didn’t know, of what kind of intensities he could create, of where it came from, of why he had it…then there were those sudden images in his dream…the song.

“Feliciano, relax, you’ve done something incredible for this city,” Arthur interrupted, hoping to help with his easing.

“Crowds are constantly formed at the front of the castle with all kinds of gifts, we’ve even brought some up here,” Alfred pointed to the pile of flowers, cards and boxes, all so neat, so kind. Feliciano was overwhelmed.

“Alfred, Arthur and I will show our own gratitude by presenting all of you that helped with the invasion with special badges and honors. A great presentation will be done after we make our own Validity Spheres,” the Spadian Jack announced.

“Oh, thank you so much. Ludwig, I and the rest will feel so honored,” he excited.

“We are glad, and now that we know you have finally woken up, I must take my leave, I have to continue with other urgent business,” the jack bowed and made his way, followed by his brothers, sister and cousins, who all gave one last wave before they departed through the door.

“How long was I asleep?” Feliciano wondered.

“Just a day, you didn’t miss much,” Alfred let him know.

“Our best healers dealt with your injuries while you were resting. They’ll later come to continue, you still need a couple of more days before you’re all settled. Instead of the earlier decided three days, we thought it was best you stayed in the castle for six, so you could leave well on your journey to the Club kingdom,” Arthur told.

Feliciano gazed down to the bandages he had wrapped on him, mostly on the expanse of his shoulder and that area of his back where he had been affected by the explosion. He could finally move his arm although with some small waves of pain that wouldn’t let him turn it completely without straining more. He still felt tired, with great hunger and weakness, one that didn’t let him truly stand from his rest on the bed. Yes, he still needed more days of healing.

“Thank you, thank you so much,” Feliciano wished them dearly, gratitude that Alfred and Arthur though was too big after the way Feliciano dealt with saving their city. They should be the ones drowning him in all kinds of thanks.

“Only the best we can offer,” Arthur bowed.

“We’ll leave to give you both some time to rest and talk,” Alfred decided.

“If anything, don’t be afraid to send any of the servants to fetch us,” Arthur wished lastly before he took Alfred’s offered arm, wrapping himself sweetly around him before they headed out together.

It was nice to see them happy like this, proud of their love and union unlike the state they had been when they visited Berlin almost a year ago. When he turned his gaze towards Ludwig, he wished the same chance would be granted to them. Feliciano brought his hands to hold his dearly, so relieved, so great to have him by his side, he could almost lean and kiss him.

“Are you all right now?” Feliciano asked him. He remembered how he had been dealing with Khaos’s men himself, how they hurt him, cut him, even brought him to the ground about ready to crash his ribs.

Ludwig smiled, raising the sleeve of the jacket he wore to show his own bandages with special sealed marks which helped with more healing.

“I’m fine, my own wounds were manageable, it only took a couple of hours for the healers to deal with, unlike you, I should be the one asking you this question,” they both chuckled, their hands now united unto a mend, comforting and helpful.

“I’m going to be fine, I’m sure,” Feliciano assured with a smile, so warm, so beautiful, it spread its own joy to Ludwig, who grinned himself, both suddenly nervous for words when all their world at the moment was sharing that glow in their eyes. That lean once again…that chance for a new kind of meet, and after everything, yes, oh yes, Feliciano wanted it, oh he was there, so close, their breaths one. He wasn’t surprised anymore about how Ludwig would turn away, erase as always, pretend like that approach didn’t happen. By now Feliciano would just roll his eyes and simply settle, leaning back into his bed, prepared for the sudden change of air and topic that was to take place.

“Feliciano…” Ludwig began, “you were singing just now in your sleep.”

“I was?” He thought it was just something that he heard in his head, not something that he actually mumbled out.

“You were singing Romulus’s song, Accept to be mine, parts of it actually, and then you… sang these two lines I’ve never heard of before…”

Did he really…?

“What were they?” He wanted to be sure.

“You sang… All will join in your defend, and, so the heavens will bless in your rest our perfect peace…”

Feliciano had been questioning those parts himself as he dreamed it.

“Did you make that up?” Ludwig wondered.

“No…they just… appeared in my dream…kind of…out of nowhere. It was weird, I started seeing and feeling things too,” he recalled.

“What…exactly?” Ludwig leaned more curiously, expecting to hear, a tighter hold in their hands, begging even, it was sudden to Feliciano but he had no problem with telling.

“I really didn’t see anything to detail, everything was too blurry, but I heard…a woman singing, I saw this smile that kind of reminded me of mamma and hair just like hers too, I thought it was her for a moment but… it was still…different, and then I saw like…slashing swords, this…man…but it was too quick to really remember. I felt…agitation, I could hear explosions, I saw this…starry sky…a particular formation and then I felt like someone…

hugging me, it…felt so real, so…unlikely for it to be a dream…" and he silenced as his mind really tried to fetch more about this, but nothing more was brought, he will have to deal with what he saw that moment.

Ludwig tried to piece together in his mind, but he did not come up with a bigger clue either, he just nodded.

Their moment was interrupted by the sudden opening of the door, a familiar little winged lion flying headfirst, cradling quickly in Feliciano's lap excitedly.

"Pookie!" Feliciano cried, quickly taking him to grab, cuddle and embrace, the little lion nuzzling back and somehow trying to share the same wrap by raising his paws against Feliciano.

A group of white and blue robed figures entered as well. By their items Feliciano could tell they were the healers, who bowed to him, but not moving any closer yet.

"I have to go, better leave them with the healing, I'll come back once they finish,"

"Okay." They both nodded and had to painfully let go, Feliciano giving him one last smile before he was out the door.

As Ludwig walked on down the halls, deciding to get something for lunch, the same new phrases repeated on his head. All will join in your defend…so the heavens will bless in your rest our perfect peace…he kept connecting it to…could it make sense? But no, there was still-

"Hey!" He recognized Alfred's calling, approaching him from a small room where he was sharing a snack with Arthur.

"Got some time to talk?" He wished.

"I believe so, Arthur won't mind?"

"He has to prepare a meeting with the builders about fixing the wall, he was about to kick me out anyways," he laughed, moving them along the hall, through impressive arches, paintings, columns and even craftily paned windows helping to relax their troubling minds. They reached a private area left deserted just for them, with no one to interfere in whatever conversation they brought up, solitude with not even the hurry of servants.

"So, Feliciano is really all right?" Alfred still worried.

"He has some troubles with his wound, but other than that he's completely fine." He decided not to tell him about the dream and the new phrases to the song he sang.

"I'm glad, would hate to see something happen to him, he's a total sweetheart that didn't deserve to go through this, but well…chosen by the gods as the Queen of Hearts, it's not exactly a safe position, but what can we do?" Alfred shrugged.

"Indeed."

Afterwards Ludwig silenced, his thoughts still puzzling, but Alfred didn't know or understand and it was making the silence unsettling.

"So um…things have changed with you and Feli," he had wanted to point out for a while, just the topic to have Ludwig's head rising in attention.

"The last time we went to Berlin things seemed tense between you two, Arthur and I barely saw you together unless it was for royal business and you both seemed rather reluctant to actually be close. It was nothing like the two friends you were back when I used to visit Hearts as a kid. It was odd and worrying, and then hearing that he denied your marriage proposal…ouch." He didn't know if that was still something awkward to mention so he was a little hesitant to continue, but Ludwig didn't say anything back.

"Which reminds me, sorry we couldn't go to the engagement party," he apologized.

"Don't fret, you and Arthur were marrying and getting crowned in a couple of days, having you visit Hearts to then see a failed proposal would have just made you both more stressed. I sometimes wished I didn't have so many guests that day, it only made the occurrence more embarrassing." He still wanted to hide his face in shame every time he remembered it.

"But hey, like I said, things have changed, I mean, look at how protective you guys got with each other, Feli so much that he even raised and entire damn wall. You're holding hands and he's even smiling at you now, I'm sure by the time you two return to Berlin you'll be asking again and I'm certain he'll accept this time, and then Arthur, Yao and I have to start preparing bags for the ceremony," Alfred was already planning and ecstatic, but it didn't seem to spread to Ludwig, if anything it made him more somber.

"I…don't know, to tell you the truth Alfred…I don't even know if I'll be returning to Berlin…"

Alfred stopped his moving steps all completely, turning to him, confused and incredulous, thinking he was exaggerating and only doubting when they had proven themselves more than capable during this entire journey. The reports of how it had been going were wild.

There was only the Club Kingdom left, how worst could things get?

"You're starting to say bullshit, Ludwig. Really, don't think like that, you'll both be doing fine, there's nothing to worry about. Now come on, my cooks make this cucumber sandwich that's to die for, you must simply have a taste," Alfred hurried them in the direction towards the lunch area, hoping it would be enough to distract Ludwig from these sudden dark thoughts.

It didn't work…his mind was now plagued and a countdown seemed clearer with haunt.

Two more days of healing and Feliciano could finally stand from the bed, his movements good and his wounds slowly vanishing. He could wear that beautiful opened blue tailcoat with the silver buttons, a comfortable shirt below, comfortable pants along with his usual

boots. When he had come down from the room, meeting with Arthur, the other couldn't help but whistle, looking up and down in heavy intrigue.

"You're looking handsome today," he complimented, taking a sip from his tea as he worked on some contraption that he was asked to help fix.

"Thanks, thought I should look appropriate handing this in," he showed a letter.

"Where are you going with that?"

"To the Luna Rani academy, I made a promise to a Viking boy that saved us back in Hearts to hand in his recommendation so he can study here,"

"A Viking boy?"

"Mhm, but he was not a lot like the rest, he really wanted to gain a more professional education with magic, he always wanted to go here, so after saving us, I thought this was the best I could do," Feliciano hoped, holding dearly to the letter, jumping on his heals with excitement to go out into the city, Pookie on his shoulders as a guide and protector, just as ready and eager.

"Well then, I wish this boy luck, I'm sure he will be accepted if your story and what he handed to you is enough, I would be glad to have someone of his talent in the city." Feliciano glided with more spirit, turning and about just ready to go…until he remembered…he didn't know where the school was.

"Tell Lei to accompany you, he occasionally takes some courses there so he knows all the routes from the castle," Arthur answered sensing his question.

"Oh, perfect, where is he?"

"Surely by the front of the castle, there's a patch of land they sometimes go to train. As you're making your way you'll easily spot him."

Feliciano nodded to him in thanks and quickly headed off down the halls to the exit. Of course, he would take his time with admiring the art and majesty of the interior architecture of this castle, tall, beautiful, in the expected blues and silvers, majesties that continued on through different halls that tempted him to escape. No, he had to do this, Emil was counting on him.

He found the doors of grandeur, leading himself out into the welcome of a city that he could finally admire without the worry of an invasion. Oh the Aces it was beautiful, in define structures, artistry, with a good mend of nature that had Feliciano's breath taken as he took the first steps into the meet of this sun. He gazed upwards, the castle towering, as high and in a form that was indeed similar to Berlin's, only that it didn't count on the rest of a hill but its own structure of strength, with bridges to new towers and wings, in shine of blue and silver for the sun to lay its ray and shine it the more. He began to move backwards, lost in all its details, its design, its color, that he didn't notice that he was reaching a group of stairs.

“Feli, I suggest you look out!” Lien had warned just in time for Feliciano to turn and spot that he was only centimeters from falling down.

“Ah, thanks,” he called out towards her.

She gave him a salute and continued with the training she was doing with the rest of the group he knew, as well as some other members he did not recognize, but he did recognize Lei.

“Oh, Lei! I need your help!” He called, rushing to him and interrupting whatever exercise he was trying to do. He explained the situation and Lei had no problem with halting his training for the day to take Feliciano across the city until they reached the academy. Using trains or simply walking, Lei made sure that they took a long route just to give Feliciano a chance to see more of the city.

Oh the buildings were wonderful, the nature added made one forget that it was divided from the forest with a wall, people making use of the day to do their chores, their activities, runs or leisure time in the blue and green grass, with picnics and games that Feliciano was tempted to join as he passed. It was also Feliciano’s chance to see all these machines that he was constantly told about when hearing about spades, like the automobiles, the elevators, fans, streetlights and steamboats upon the rivers. Unlike what Alfred and Arthur had told him, he did see the mix of magic, of wizard apprentices studying their books, of parents using it to help them better deal with their children, bakeries adding their touches and even the cleaning of the streets and walkways. He didn’t know if it was just that Alfred and Arthur had settled the differences of the kingdom and really tried to make a change or it was just how things had always been no matter the kind of restrictions and differences that might come.

They finally came before the building, a large structure standing quite imperially, towering pillars holding the massiveness of its marble, of its crystal dome, a square in front that matched its own grandness. Students already used the space for practice, for leisure, to run across as they made their ways, to either inside the building to reach their classes on time or just out to whatever parts of the city they needed to reach. Feliciano felt rather intimidated by it all, holding the letter much tighter, rather ignorant to all the stares he was given, all recognizing and widening their eyes in wonder. It had happened all throughout the city but Feliciano was too distracted to notice, not to mention he was with Lei, who would glare at anybody who dared come close. Feliciano was under enough stressed, he didn’t need people barging in, even if Feliciano wouldn’t mind. He loved meeting new people and any new chance was a great one, but he did need to focus on this.

They finally entered the building, its interior matching in magnificence. Corridors, balconies, heights, even different kinds of items were exhibited in countless amounts that made every corner a site to watch, something new to see and an array of activity that seemed endless. All kinds of students passed them by, from elves to even fairies, or humans just dealing with their dragons.

How amazing, how shinning, how could Lei just move about without faltering the slightest in wonder.

“Feliciano!” The very person called, pointing over to a roundabout desk they were nearing, basically where they should ask to know where Feliciano was supposed to hand in these things and who he was supposed to talk to. They spoke, filled in the necessary information and the girl behind the desk went off to inform the headmaster, advising that they stayed there while she announced the visit. Lei went off to sit on near chair while Feliciano continued with his gazing, landing on models of different kinds of creatures, explaining their anatomy and power, tapestry projects, magical orbs floating as a sort of decoration, enchanted plants and finally, right above the attending desk, something so large Feliciano was surprised he hadn’t noticed before. Handing from the height of the crystal dome, there was a transparent case only holding…part of a slab. It wasn’t half, it wasn’t a big part, no, there was only but just one corner of the entire case filled with only one single piece. It was pretty exaggerated to keep something so large to only fill in one corner. What kind of image was even in there? He extended his vision to take a better look, to see on it the image of a man, only part of it actually, not really offering anything else to give him more clue at what was this man’s purpose. It certainly didn’t seem Spadian, in fact it didn’t have any familiar symbols. Whatever there was, it was ruined, covered, scratched and broken. Really there was no evidence, no story, no light.

“Mr. Ulan will gladly see you, follow me this way please,” she returned, interrupting whatever questioning Feliciano was doing with this slab. He nodded and followed right behind her, deeper into the building, into the main stairs that lead the rising into the rest of the floors. Lei decided to stay behind, giving Feliciano a wave of luck, settling back into the chair ready for a small nap.

Feliciano followed the secretary until they reached a good height, and instead of taking the singular hall forward, she took out a pen, let it drop, and a blue portal was opened.

“Right this way, he’s already waiting for you,” she ushered.

She was used to this hesitation, to this testing as Feliciano dipped a hand trying to figure it out, rolling her eyes and having no other choice than to just push him inside. Suddenly he stumbled onto a shelve and book covered room, only but part of the office in glass windows showing to a greenhouse of all kinds of blue and purple fauna, right where the desk lay, where the figure of who he assumed was the headmaster sat.

“An honor to have the arising Queen of Hearts here,” he extended and welcomed, having a chair fly and push Feliciano onward until he was right in front, sitting in that very chair startled, Pookie as confused and trying to realize what was going on. It was surprise he had managed to keep his hold on Feliciano’s shoulder this entire time.

“An even bigger honor after you did to save our city, I give you gratitude for everyone here in the academy, you have no idea how much we appreciate it.” He was honest and truly thankful.

“I wouldn’t let such a beautiful and important city fall, and in the process I…learned about this power and used it to stop everything. I’m so glad it worked, but I still feel bad about all the damages I did to the wall,” Feliciano slumped with fault.

“Sacrifices, besides, it’s still standing as we all wanted. I’m sure the crown will give it the necessary attention to have it fixed quickly. Nobody is truly mourning it. But enough of this, one of my secretaries said you have some things to give and tell me,” he was eager, leaning to be given and told.

“Ah yes of course!” He took out the envelope with everything, pushing it across the desk for Mr. Ulan to reach and grab, examining before he began to tear to look at all the contents.

“Back when Ludwig and I were starting our journey in Hearts, some Khaos’s men ambushed our train and captured us even as we escaped. A group of…joker Vikings-” he had to admit “-saved us and offered their flight boat to take us to the shores of the Arabic provinces in the Diamond Kingdom. In the crew there was a young boy named Emil, he saw us getting captured, found our location and helped our escape from our binds and the cave they had us in. If it wasn’t for his big role in the mission and his abilities, I’m afraid right now we would be in the clutches of Khaos himself. During our stay in their ship, I learned Emil was really well adept in magic, full of wonderful tricks and knowledge that need to be in a place as amazing as this, sadly his role as a joker has impended that, but as gratitude I promised to give him a reinstitution into the Hearts registry once I return to Berlin, as well as to bring these letters and papers of application to the Academy once I reach Washington. So please, I beg you, accept this boy for what he did and what he can do, as well as a kind of gratitude for what I did to save your city. Please help to give him the future he wants and I know he can achieve.”

He truly hoped it had been enough, that Mr. Ulan could see the wanting enough in his eyes and how he couldn’t stop raising his hands together in a continuous prayer hoping for that acceptance. The man didn’t really show an exact expression to show his answer, just giving his attention to the papers, reading, giving a nod, a slight widening to his eyes but always staying stoic in his judging. He would question occasionally and Feliciano stayed there to give him all the necessary answers, a chat of dealings that went on for the hour. By the time they were done, Mr. Ulan opening up a new portal and joining the arising Queen in his outing, Feliciano still didn’t have a sure answer and he was eager, Mr. Ulan could easily tell.

“As for my decision, I’ll tell Mr. Bondevik first, he wrote an address I could send a message to. I’m sure he will let you know afterwards,” he smiled.

“But I won’t get any of these messages until I return to Berlin,” Feliciano disappointed.

“A little suspense then. Gives you more anticipation for when you return.”

Feliciano sighed but had to accept. He would just have to wait then, but at least he did his part of the promise and that was enough for now.

As he met with the large lobby of the academy, his eyes instantly set once again on the empty case, the one with the single piece, longing gazes in silence that Mr. Ulan couldn’t miss.

“Is something the matter, your highness?” He questioned.

Feliciano quickly pointed, “what is that?”

It took a while for Mr. Ulan to find the specific object and when he did he sighed sadly, but there was no problem with telling. “You do know that the Spade kingdom holds what was once the White kingdom?”

“Yes, it’s land to the northwest,” he remembered from his teachings.

“Indeed. After the war of the blackened decades, everything was left to ruin, nothing was recognizable and our ancestors could find nothing to keep, simply deciding to reconstruct and create new area for living and farming. That little slab piece was one of the only things we found surviving. We believe it once belonged to a very important mural in the kingdom, located right at the gates at what was once the castle of the capital. We have some writings that say people would travel great lengths just to see it, saying that the story was the most important in all the kingdoms, but the writings that specify in that tale are lost. Here in the academy we have concocted different theories, some think it might tell the story of Pisa, some say maybe Khaos, maybe one of the Aces, maybe all of them, maybe about the very creation of our world, but we can never know since the rest of the mural has not been found,” he drowned into a fault, into a miss, into the stress of a failed mission.

“Why keep such a big case for something so tiny though?”

“We keep hoping that we might one day find it and connect it together. There’s always excavations being done in that territory so we keep hoping, besides, it reminds us of the still mysteries of our world and how sometimes we only have tiny parts to something that is much larger than what we understand. We can never cease our search because someday we might have a complete picture.”

It was a good way to look at it, a good reminder to students who are always looking for new ways to use their magic, to use new spells, new inventions and new skills to fill in their own empty cases.

Feliciano wished Mr. Ulan goodbye as well as luck and belief in their search before he left the academy and back into the fray of the city with Lei.

Chapter 44

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The day before the presentation of their honors and the formation of the Validity Spheres, Ludwig and Feliciano decided on taking a stroll throughout the city. They visited all kinds of monuments, took rest with the most amazing views while enjoying in conversation, they ate at exquisite cafes that Arthur had suggested they visited and lost themselves in the small streets decorated in blue mosaics, taking beautiful winding turns, through bridges over brooks breaking from the larger river, with the dimming light of the sculpted streetlamps just enough. It was silent with barely any passage of others, especially with the reigning night and many in this area surely having dinner or heading to sleep after a long day.

“-well I still threw my three silvers coins,” Feliciano said.

“What could you have possibly wished for that needed the waste of three silver coins?”

“For no more Khaos’s men attacks, I really just want to finish what’s left of the journey in peace,” Feliciano tired.

“Let’s see if that happens to be the case, although I do admit that I’m proud that you used your wish for something more needed and good for us."

“Thanks, what about you? What did you wish for?”

“Hm?”

“Don’t play around, I saw you throw your own silver coin. Come on, tell me, tell me, what did you wish for?” Feliciano pleaded with such childish need, jumping as they stopped by a bridge, right over its arched center, in direction to the moon that painted the city in an ethereal light blue color.

“It’s embarrassing,” Ludwig admitted as he took his lean upon the rail.

“Can’t be as embarrassing as that time you tried to take flight with a jump from nonno’s bed,” Feliciano laughed.

“Oh my aces, you still remember that?”

“Do you really expect me to forget? You hit your head hard and you started crying so much that we have to call your mom from the villa to come pick you up, and even then you wouldn’t stop wailing.”

Ludwig reddened and hid his face in shame. He still chuckled though, after all these were just things that happened in their early childhood, things changed, lessons were learned and once could look back to them in smiles.

“Fine…” he defeated, “…I wished for a puppy.”

“Awww.” To Feliciano that sounded wondrous, placing a hand on his chest truly touched.

“That’s not embarrassing at all, it’s adorable. We should get a puppy once we return to Berlin.” There was serious intent as he took his own lean beside Ludwig.

“Really?”

“Yes! I’m sure the castle would allow it. You always wanted one so I think it’s about time we fulfill it,” he smiled with promise.

“What about Pookie?”

“What? We can’t have more pets?” He looked insulted, with puffed cheeks that only made him the more adorable. Ludwig couldn’t help the chuckle, the extent of his hand caressing those very round rosses of his cheeks, really without notice, letting the moment just lead him in what the truly wanted to do. It was sweet, it was lulling, Feliciano found his lean, smiling and blushing upon the touch.

“In that case, I wish to have three puppies instead,” Ludwig declared anew.

“Yes! Oh! We should also have a kitty, name it Pookie too!”

“One feline named Pookie is enough.”

“Gino it is then!” Feliciano decided, with a pointed finger to the sky in assurance, in laughter that brought them together, Feliciano finding easiness in letting himself lay upon Ludwig’s shoulder.

As a gush of wind brought colder air, making them shiver into silence, Ludwig quickly went to defend Feliciano by wrapping his large arms around his frame, tightly around his waist, just the needed comfort for Feliciano to lean upon, letting it do its own kind of magic until no coldness could be felt.

Let it be, let it be, let it be, both Ludwig and Feliciano told themselves, enjoying, pushing away any thoughts that could interrupt, that could make them move apart. Ludwig let himself relish by laying his head upon Feliciano’s hair, the sweet scent clear to him, to take as many whiffs as he wanted, while Feliciano could let his hands run across the potency of his arms, a hint of all that muscle that had grown, that long had made Feliciano feel like Ludwig had been a different person. But now…all he could feel was softness, the never changing trust, confidence and even relief, like they were truly being reunited.

The bell of a near clock tower ringed deeply, interrupting whatever tranquility they had to gaze over to the distant time. It was ten, they really should be heading back to the castle to prepare for their sleeping schedules when they had such a heavy day the next morning. Reluctantly they had to let go from this settled peace, moving and in direction to the castle, although this time they let themselves in the hold of their united hands, with warmth, secureness and a hope that Feliciano desperately wanted Ludwig to give it its chance to stay.

The castle had awaken them early, early to the point that Feliciano, even Alfred and Arthur, were still yawning as they made their way together to the throne room, the sun taking its first gleams of the horizon, leaving other parts of the sky still in darkness. There was a heavy silence throughout the halls, for not even most of the servants had awakened to start the preparations for the handing of the honors that would be given for later in the afternoon. Finally they reached the doors after several spin turns, for Alfred to easily open, watching as all kinds of levels, of designs, of decorational items began to move in a kind of dance, welcoming all the royals inside. Feliciano had smiled and halted his entering just to look at the way everything fell like leaves in autumn, only to be hastened with a push from Ludwig inside.

The Spadian throne room was a modest one in size, although it did have an impressive height, behind the seats of power a towering templon, in gold, in blue, in all kinds of ancient symbols of the kingdom. Little statues of important members to their history joined, along with ancient crowns, ancient diamonds, all raining and coming down to meet in the three seats that seemed rather simple compared to that impressive display. Large windows were at each side, making everything sparkle alive, making the room more enchanting. As Feliciano moved forward, lost in all the glow, he finally noticed one particular shine that come from the floor.

As the last pavements, there was a design of yet another star coated sky, the same formation, the same standing, this time in blue gems, seeming to pop out to the point that Feliciano even reached thinking he could touch them. It was spectacular and he lost his eyes on it until they all took their designated spot for the beginning of the formation. Yao came over from another back door, with a chest that he placed on a pedestal presented right in front of the thrones. With a key it was opened and there were the empty crystal orbs, ready for the job. Alfred, Arthur and Yao each took their own, standing over their spot as they had practiced, taking their breaths, easing any stress, any tenseness, until they could relax fully without any obstacles to their own bodies. Ludwig and Feliciano stood by the side, Feliciano petting Pookie to a still, who was on his shoulder as by duty.

“I will begin,” Yao declared, moving forward, all attention falling on him.

He ceased his eyes, focused, he alighted as per usual. The orb moved around his hold on its own, filling it in shades of light blue and dark, forming until he was standing rightfully on the ground, seeming unfazed, but by the sweat he brushed aside it showed that it had been as demanding as it should be for them. His orb lined in those two shades of blue, with small purple dots decorating some of those lines, quite unique from others they had seen.

Yao’s was done and so Alfred decided to come up front to begin his own. It was harder for him to reach that relax, it took a while for his own alighting to begin, but soon enough the filling was done quick along with his slight floating. It was done, in a dark royal blue that was the main symbol color of the kingdom, with light blue singular designs at the top and bottom that spun around almost like the very orb was wearing a crown. He wobbled slightly as he had reached the floor yet again, a couple of heavy breaths, but other than that he seemed to be doing fine.

Finally it was Arthur's turn, who took the expected position, taking easily that control, that ease, as quickly having him floating along and doing his fill. Nothing different, nothing shinning, just the typical that was of a Queen, still nothing like Feliciano's had been. Arthur came to the floor, almost falling, but Alfred took a quick hold of him, settling him straight, offering his lean even as Arthur's vision came back to normal, as his strength returned and he could properly stand, but Alfred still refused to leave his side. Arthur laid a strong grip on Alfred's shoulder to let him know that he was fine, that he could stand properly and show his own orb. It was the only one of the orbs that actively changed from shades of blues to purple, with added shimmering glows. It had Feliciano awing.

Ludwig then moved forward with the staff in hand, the three spheres now properly done and presented just as the arising king directed his staff to them. He took the usual hold, creating the spell and the orbs were gone, filling their own sockets on the staff.

Three reds, three yellows, now three blues… only three more black sockets left to fill.

They all applauded, Ludwig and Feliciano especially taking breaths of relief. Yes, they finally had Spades' and there was only one kingdom left, one kingdom left! It was a reminder that all felt, that all knew of consolation and so they showed it by commenting along.

"Only one more kingdom, only three more orbs," Yang said.

"Now it will surely be an easy journey to Moscow," Arthur aided.

"Before you know it, you'll be placing the spheres before the field," Alfred added.

Feliciano appreciated those comforting words, holding their hands, letting the weight just fall off his shoulders for a moment, to relieve in the fact that they were so close to finishing. He thought it would surely be the same state Ludwig would be in, but when he turned to him, he stood frozen in his spot, almost strained, his eyes clearly lost.

"Ludwig?" Feliciano questioned.

A realization seemed to hit Ludwig when he connected his eyes with Feliciano, one that made him unsure, with a slight tremble, almost to a panic.

"Ludwig?" Feliciano leaned close hoping to offer some kind of comfort, but Ludwig turned away before he could give him that chance.

"I…have to go put the staff away," he excused, rushing out of the throne room, a quick crash of the door that did well to announce that he had been fretting.

"What's wrong with him?" Alfred asked.

Everybody shrugged it off, but Feliciano remained frozen with an on look to the door, wondering and questioning.

The presentation of the honors was done in front of the castle, out in the open for all to witness and shout in celebration. There was a marching show from their soldiers, an orchestra playing wonderful music and all the important leaders were dressed in prestigious blue, with jewels, proud symbols and simplistic crowns. Ludwig and Feliciano were dressed in their own kinds of blues, simple ones, similar to those the soldiers wore, just appropriate for the handing and the coming feast that was to be given for them.

After prayers, after chants, a demonstration from the priests, then a speech by Yao, the very jack then presented to the public the badges, silver medallion stars with a specific Spadian symbol, one of heroes and remembrance. Mei, Lei, Lien, Yong, Cheng, Ludwig and Feliciano each took their turn before a different ruler, who would address what they had done to stop the invasion, highlighting their tricks, their skills, just any little thing that overall helped with the largeness of the scheme.

Feliciano was last, kneeling before Arthur, who held the last medallion over him, ready for his words. “For defending and preparing our towers, for not halting your limitation, creating the final attack that completed the mission, a triumphant one that showed your true power as Queen and fulfilling the expectations of what the world wants of an Italian Queen, the first in centuries since Augusta. Feliciano Valenti, I present to you the medallion of high honor of our Spadian kingdom, only given to those of our bravest heroes and soldiers, witnessed before all in the city of Washington, as one of the many gratitudes we can give you for saving our beloved home.”

Arthur leaned and placed the medal on an area on Feliciano’s chest, making sure it was well adjusted before he nodded to show Feliciano he could stand. He stood and turned around to the crowds, presenting his medallion over his chest. The public became wild, shouting, waving, to which Feliciano smiled and gave the same attention.

“These are our heroes of the great lift, let them be well remembered and let their courage serve as a model to all!” Alfred announced loudly, rising his own staff, the legendary one with the clock in its center, tapping it to the ground, a sign enough for soldiers to form, to salute and prepare. “As an honor, today we pledge the Heartian chant!”

Ludwig and Feliciano instantly stiffed at the mention, strong first, heads high, ready to join along with all.

“Declare respect to the faith of our Heartian Ace, to the law of our nature, to let the chimes ring and flourish in red. The Ace of Hearts calls, join in the hand, in defense of all good. For our unity! For our blood! For Glory! For Honor! For Riches! For the gods! For Hearts!”

Feliciano always felt this great exhilaration whenever he called it and it was nice to have this new foreign city join in it with them, exploding fireworks into the sky to shine in the darkening day, creating awes, wonder and the beginning of the feast.

It was more like an outdoor ball the whole city was invited to, especially after Feliciano’s insisting to have the family of the guards and soldiers whose lives were lost in the invasion. Feliciano made sure to spend his time with those families, assuring them that their loved ones

died in honor, to save their city and them, yet unjustly, with remorse and tears of fault. He tried to exalt the children with joyous conversations, sharing in amazing sweets and even dances in the ballroom. Ludwig spoke on with many of the guards and soldiers who had been present…distant, in his own corners not daring to take peek at whatever action occurred outside of the concentration he gave to his chats. It was odd, but Feliciano had understood as just Ludwig wanting to show his support to the soldiers.

He had been acting weird the entire day, moving away from whatever closeness he tried to give him. His eyes reverted to the same coldness…to the same uncare and sternness that…no, maybe he was just nervous on how the last of the journey would go, maybe about meeting the field soon, maybe just all this presence from people of a kingdom they didn't know so well. He would be fine, he kept telling himself…he would be fine.

As he was conversing with a new group, Arthur came tapping on Feliciano's shoulder, interrupting the chatter with everyone offering a bow.

"Will you excuse us?" Arthur told them as he took Feliciano and began moving them elsewhere, down the halls of the castle, as much away from the activity as possible.

"Arthur, what's wrong?" Feliciano wondered.

"The carriage for your departure has arrived, all your baggage has been boarded and Ludwig is there waiting for you. You have to leave immediately."

"Just like that? Without saying goodbye to anybody?" He worried.

"Feliciano, we can't attract too much attention. This is as silent as we can manage and our contacts are already waiting. Your trip to Moscow from here will go easily. You'll ride until you reach the Columbian province, there you will meet with a group that will take you through the denseness of the Amazon on a river boat until you reach Murmansk in the Russian province, there King Ivan himself will be there to greet you and Ludwig and then take you to Moscow. After it's only a short carriage ride until you reach the capital city of Clubs," Arthur assured as they continued their way until they reached one of the back entrances of the castle. It was in a hidden area, with a route towards the forest, circulated well by trees, dark in the night and forward unto new territories. Alfred, along with Yao and his siblings and cousins were there, having already wished their goodbye to Ludwig, now sharing in embraces of luck with Feliciano, making sure he was well settled in the carriage before it was shut, before they gave the signal for the horses to move, Feliciano not stopping his waves, hanging from the window until they were too far to distinguish.

He settled back inside, hoping to share some sort of chat with Ludwig, perhaps a smile, maybe a chance to color together…or cuddle and let themselves rest in their closeness. Yet by the time he met his figure, his eyes were elsewhere, his entire body turned directly away from him, eyes faltering into rest, settling himself in the seat of the moving carriage. Oh yeah, it had been a long day, he was surely tired and wanted nothing more than to sleep. Feliciano decided he should respect that, readying his own position to rest, but not before giving Ludwig a "Good night", with a smile and a lighting shine of his eyes.

Ludwig didn't reply.

They traveled through the whole night, the early morning and afternoon of the next day. They only made a total of two stops, one for breakfast and one for lunch, hurried, silent, with no eyes meeting, no words…it was almost like Feliciano was doing this part of the trip alone. His only comfort was Pookie who would nuzzle or actually hear his excitement for the things he saw out the window or whatever he drew in his sketchbook. He hoped it would be enough to get Ludwig to share in some words, but he remained the whole time with his eyes at anything, anything but Feliciano, ignorant, indifferent and just…resurfacing hurtful feelings Feliciano thought he could rest. He kept trying to find excuses, trying to find meaning, wondering if something had happened, but he was once again fearing to talk to him, with an expectant air of getting no answers, only turns or he would walk away as soon as they finished their food, only to return once he was called to board the coach again.

They had arrived to Cartagena in the same attitudes, just as the sun settled upon this beautiful town, seeming more active in the coming night, quite hard to find the person they were supposed to meet. The horses stopped upon a stable, where they were instantly rid of the binds to the coach, the care takers advising the royals to wait with their things for a Tulio Valencia. They waited so long the stable owners offered them dinner, quite an amazing one that Ludwig and Feliciano didn't mind having. It was almost romantic with all the amazing views they had despite being in a stable, the type Feliciano would imagine letting themselves exchange passionate words, maybe a kiss, maybe a dance, but whenever Feliciano tried to look back into those eyes, they were once again stern, cold, unaware of such a chance they had and not willing to offer anything. Finally, a young handsome man came, waving and approaching, with a worried expression, heaving and slouching before them as he tried to regain his breath.

"I apologize greatly for the lateness, but we were still awaiting for the rest to arrive. I'm Tulio Valencia, an honor to meet you, your highnesses," he then bowed, close enough as if he was to raise and bring them both to an embrace even if strangers.

"Come, we are already late as we are and we can't give any other delays!" He fretted, already ushering them along down the town, Ludwig and Feliciano giving their attendants at the stables thanks and gratitude for the food they were given. Feliciano gave some caresses and kisses to the horses as he always did before following behind, through quite the scenic streets and dimming lights that tempted Feliciano to lose himself, but if there was a time Ludwig paid attention to him, it was to make sure that he stayed in the route forward until they reached a busy port, with boats still floating in and out no matter the lateness, as busy as if it was an early morning. They passed quite the marvelous ships, gigantic, rich, with amazing craft, even magical ones that could take flight, but they just kept moving alongside them, going through darker parts of the port, until the activity slowly began to diminish and the boats became smaller, weathered and less attractive. To be honest, Ludwig and Feliciano were starting to get suspicious when they had to take a boardwalk that separated from the commotion and into the near woods, a lonely area that made one forget about the plentiful town they were just in.

"Finally!" Someone shouted from the end of their marked woodened route, blended well in the darkness, making it hard for Feliciano to spot anything.

One of the members of the group finally lite up a couple of lanterns in the area, making the group, as well as their boat, visible.

They were a total of seven waiting, presented as well as they could with what they had on a short notice, bowing as practiced, then ushering to what would be their ride for the river trip.

It was hideous.

Sure, it was large, two floored even, but it was made with old panels of different kinds of metals and wood, pieces of junk, dirty, poor and seeming like it would be ready to fall under their feet. To make the royals' assumption more real, a metal rod fell that instant and landed on the deck of the ship.

"That…that…that is normal," Tulio tried to excuse, keeping his smile as the rest, but as another thing mysteriously clanged, it began to fail, now strained and embarrassed.

"Okay, so it's not the most luxurious thing on the amazon," the only woman in the group defended.

"But Catalina has done and worked well throughout our journeys, strong as any of those big tough stuff that can't even make it to the lines of the Club Kingdom," one continued to defend, rubbing the haul in endearment.

"Look, it does look like a piece of shit, but were the only ones in the port that can go through the whole of the river until reaching Murmansk in the Club Kingdom," another admitted.

"We'll try to make your stay as comfortable as we can, we're only sorry Arthur could not contact or get someone with a better boat," one even approached, with an apologetic expression that Feliciano was starting to hurt from.

"If it does the job, then…I hope we can enjoy this journey. We will accommodate ourselves how we can," Feliciano kindly told them, with an appreciative smile none the less. It was enough to help them all regain some faith, to smile along with him, with exhilaration and readiness, eager to already sail.

"Then let's get going!" One demanded, clapping a rhythm in his hands that they all got, instantly forming into a haste. "Come on, come on, get their things, prepare the engine. Martín you're in change of the wheel!"

"Sweet!" A dark blond in the group shouted excitedly, jumping over and heading towards its direction.

"Elisa! Corisande! Don't just stand there! Take their bags!"

"Oh yeah!"

"Right!"

Each offered to take some sort of luggage from Feliciano and Ludwig's weight, then ushering them to finally board, both hesitant with their steps, testing each and every piece as they

moved forward.

“Amaro, you’re in charge of disembarking!”

“Got it!”

“Manuel, at the prow, the usual watching.”

“Will do, Pedro,” this Manuel saluted and headed off.

While they continued with the preparations, Elisa and Corisande brought Feliciano over to what would be their room, deep within the confinements of the build. Despite it having old paneling and its smallness, the room they had was the cleanest, with fresh sheets and two separate beds.

“This is the royal suit,” Elisa joked in introduction.

Feliciano begged to differ. There was an odd smell and some sort of peel was falling at the side.

“Get used to it, you’ll be here for four days,” Corisande made point and Feliciano sighed having to accept.

As Manuel dealt with organizing the ropes Amaro gave him as they began the disembarkation, starting their first sailing into the river, he noticed an extra presence in the area, the arising king of Hearts, gazing endlessly into how the river curved, continuing into the forest, of Spades and then into Clubs.

“Hey, doing all right there, your highness?” Manuel said trying to be friendly with him.

“I’m not…I’m actually very afraid,” Ludwig found himself admitting, too preoccupied with what was coming to notice exactly what he was saying and to who.

“Hey, don’t worry, Catalina hasn’t failed us yet. Sure, she’s not the pretties boat out there, but we can manage,” he tried to lighten.

“I wasn’t talking about the boat,” he retorted back sternly, leaving Manuel with question, then fear as he saw how the arising king moved down his hand, reaching to a scabbard newly tied around his waist, rich, intricate, surely holding a sword of maximum power. Sure, he wasn’t looking at any of them, he kept his gaze forward, but even so it brought shivers down Manuel’s spine, who slowly began moving away.

“All right your highness,” he said lastly before he left to deal with other matters of their departure.

Chapter End Notes

Reminder that you can follow for progress on my snapchat: worldwidecake.

After a strike and heavy parallelization in my university, they finally opened and were returning to finish the semester this summer (It's a mess). The next chapter will be a large one, and thus I will surely take my time, not only because of its length, but also because I will be busy with uni as well as working on my TEFL certification. I will be posting progress in my snapchat so you can all know when I'm working on it, when I can't, why I couldn't, when I'm finishing, when I'm editing and when I will post. Putting it out there just in case!

Chapter 45

Chapter Notes

> I know it's been a long time, but many countless of things happened (which I talked about in my personal tumblr, posted on my writing blog and even in my snapchat) that basically dwindled me in writing this chapter…which let me say is actually the longest in the entire story and it makes it 200k and who knows if the next one would be just as long (so I already ask that you be patient for it and that you understand). I really apologize for the time it took and I want to thank you all for your patience. You guys have no idea how excited I was to write this chapter and I hope it was worth the wait for you all. Enjoy!

All seven of them had been from different provinces of the southern Spades kingdom, despite three of them being related, yet even with that difference, even their own personality and outlooks, together they worked in a pattern that was harmonious and made the trek on the river peaceful and scenic. They passed quite the majestic views, disappearing the further they went or when a tree or hill covered them, to then present new views in welcome. They saw as the rivers took different kinds of turns, by waterfalls, by intimidatingly tall mountains, through mists, heavy jungle, the river expanding as large enough for them to think they were in the middle of the sea or thin enough for them to be able to touch the trees that rested on the banks. All kinds of colorful birds flew above them, with tails of ice, of fire, of winding leaves, or pristine ones that seemed like they were made of jewels. In one moment they spotted a beautiful lavender dragon sleeping in a cave from afar, griffins enjoying from drinks in the cleanest part of the river, where they met with water serpents, swimming along beside the boat without a care. It was all fantastic things that Feliciano tried his best to copy into his sketchbook, having peaceful moments while the rest had breakfast, lunch or dinner, all which they had on the boat, not a moment given to stop. If they had to resupply, they easily took the items from the branches that stretched off in their way, from natural fruits to bags left behind by other contacts. Their moving was calm, not flowing or shaking, the ground as stern as if they were on any hardened stone floor ground, it gave the chance for all kinds of activities to take place in the boat, from cooking, to card games, even for them to play their instruments, always a song to be heard in the nights, a mini feast for every star coated sky, clear enough to see them dusting in purples and blues or capture an escaped shooting star. They tapped their feet, clapped their hands, Feliciano joining along in adding lyrics they would make up that instant. It was the kind of moving feeling that made him wish he could dance…glances to Ludwig to always find him in the same state since they left the Spadian castle. Lost, eyes distant to the horizons the river kept taking, no words, no meet, he stood in solitude during the entire trip, only offering his help for certain navigational things or in the kitchen, cutting harder foods that the others couldn't manage, but always cold, always to himself. It hadn't settled well with this newly met group.

In one of those afternoons, a misty one that only the members of this ship seemed to look through while Ludwig and Feliciano remained lost, did Martín pointed into the mess, spotting a Clubian flag flying proudly between the mist, the green and the Clubian symbols clear for Ludwig and Feliciano to identify.

“Were officially in Clubs,” Elisa welcomed, a celebratory tone and shine in her eyes that the rest shared, for they fulfilled their mission in the aspect of getting them to the kingdom.

“We’ll be arriving to Murmansk tomorrow in the afternoon,” Corisande reminded with a smile and Feliciano shared one with him in high expectations, knowing they were to arrive to the final castle soon, the last capital, the last of the validity spheres, the placing in the fields and they could finally return home.

Ludwig turned away and headed back to their room, even more drifting and apart, not even coming to join the rest of the crew in dinner that night. When Feliciano had gone into the room ready for his last sleep on the boat, he found Ludwig wide awake, staring into the ceiling, not drifting from his concentration even as Feliciano entered, as he settled himself on the bed and got himself ready…it was like he wasn’t even there to him. Every time Feliciano awoke during the night, he would find Ludwig in the same position, his eyes dancing around the room, a huff of breath here and there or scratching his arm, but it seemed like he hadn’t reached any kind of rest and wouldn’t be able to. By the time dawn came, Feliciano woke to find he was alone, Ludwig gone. He despised waking at such hours, but he couldn’t take much more of it, he had to do something, he needed to initiate something between them again. He got a cloak, insisting Pookie he remained resting on the bed while he went to find Ludwig. He was at the prow, taking a sitting and keeping watch to the surrounding forest, a mist still constant but not blinding. It was comfortable, but still chilling, it had Feliciano tightening the cloak around himself.

“Morning,” he thought he could wish, with a strong smile, confident in his eyes and stature, hoping Ludwig could find ease in it.

Ludwig glanced at him but it was quick, not letting their eyes meet and only a huff as a response before he focused instead on some tangled rope on the floor.

“It’s beautiful at this hour, isn’t it?” Feliciano complimented to the surroundings, coming closer, debating if he should take his empty side or not.

"I guess," he only admitted, with a shrug and an unimportant gleam to the clearness of the water, the dimming mist, the towering hills, the dawning sky of darkness meeting that of approaching light. Feliciano wondered how Ludwig could simply describe it as that, lean and act as if the surroundings weren’t there, as if they were as plain as a wall, with no more words to say or even some sort of invitation for something to begin between them.

Impatient, Feliciano decided to take that seat beside him anyways, but it continued to instigate nothingness, for silence to reign on between them, only the rush of the water below them, of whatever new chirping birds deep within the jungle, Feliciano having to settle with what he saw before him, still hoping, still awaiting some kind of response.

Nothing, nothing, nothing, like another stranger, like another day of ignorance back at the castle.

He forgot how weakened it made him, how useless, how invisible, but he still determined, he still looked on for a kind of idea as the river shortened, a fine line that made them more unison to the forest, going along with its waking, looking for an idea, looking for an ideal, until his eyes found something rather peculiar.

A fruit, a familiar one, one of his books, of a very old promise that called him to fulfill.

With a teasing smile he stood up, reaching the edge until he met one of the coming branches, a fruit hanging perfectly for his easy reach, for him to grab and let it fall on the hold of his hand.

"Remember this?" Feliciano smiled, presenting the disgusting thing with seeds.

The sight made Ludwig nauseous, but he dared give a little grin, an idea to where this was going.

"Yes...and if I remember correctly, you did say you would eat it if we ever did find it," Ludwig dared him with teasing eyes.

Finally a glow, finally a small chance.

"Why do you think I grabbed it?" Feliciano smirked, tossing the fruit between his hands before he raised it to his nostril. The scent was awful but manageable, and so with instant action he took the first bite, the mix of slime and hard seeds a distasteful one that had his face cringing, but still he managed to find a sweet spot that settled his expression into quite the calm. Ludwig was trying hard not to laugh, trying to look away, but Feliciano's face contorted so cutely he couldn’t resist, releasing a smirk.

"It's not that bad," Feliciano admitted, turning it around, wondering if he should dare take another bite.

It was in that moment Amaro headed out from his room to do his usual work for the day, adjusting his chullo over his dark hair when he easily spotted the fruit he hoped the arising queen of hearts was not actually munching on.

"Please tell me you haven't swallowed it," he neared, panic growing in his expression and Feliciano shrugged not finding the dilemma, but he did deny to swallowing with his head.

"That's a kishore, they're extremely poisonous and could very well kill you if it hits your stomach."

Feliciano's eyes widened in panic, any movement with his mouth instantly halted, the fruit falling off his hand, landing on the deck uselessly. Even Ludwig shared in the same panic expression, ready to stand and aid.

"Spit it out!" Amaro commanded and Feliciano instantly spitted it all to the deck, making clear his disgust by groaning and trying to lick away any remnants in his hands, now

beginning to cough. It was the site that welcomed Manuel that morning as he thought he could join in peace and calm. He quickly realized what was going on by vaguely recognizing the spitted and ruined bites of fruit on the floor.

"Don't tell me he actually tried to eat a kishore."

"Yep," Amaro admitted.

"Crazy Heartians," Manuel sighed but offered a hand ushering into the boat, "come on, I have some healing potions that can help."

Feliciano quickly agreed, still continuing to rid any essence in his mouth by licking on his cloak as he went and followed Manuel, who gave one last roll of his eyes to Amaro before following behind the arising Queen.

Being left alone with Amaro somehow made Ludwig more aware, bringing embarrassment, the mess on the floor still taunting him. "I'll...clean it up..."

Amaro nodded, a slight relief.

They arrived to Murmansk in that afternoon as promised, in tranquility and smoothness, the action of this port one that was done in calm, only an occasional shout of Russian men and women commanding over their ships, boards, letting the small dingy move across them in uncare, without knowing of the presence that was held inside, of the royal stares they received as the very monarchs took their surroundings to this rather simple but comforting town. Buildings rising in slopes, in normal commute, the last of the day before all headed home, and in the passing Ludwig and Feliciano could not spot any familiar face, no crowds or fair to showcase the king they were supposed to meet. The rest of the crew spotted their extensive longing, their search, crouching and ducking as if they were traversing those very bridges they went under.

"He's here, we already got a message," Pedro said as he helped along in grabbing ropes and moving other objects preparing for their docking.

"But where?" Feliciano wondered, still searching.

"Special dock, right..." Tulio moved forward, just as they passed a large ship that covered the last enclosure where the port finished, "there."

And there was the array of flags and arms, in the Clubian greens and silvers, horses like men covered in the symbols and armors, a royal welcome unlike any Ludwig and Feliciano had received in all their journey, quite a contrast compared to the worn boat they had made their river trip the past few days.

Men helped along with the crew in their docking, in helping with bringing down the luggage and the very royals who were moved forward to be presented before King Ivan. As tall, as

intimidating, a reigning force of power that brought Ludwig and Feliciano to bow, Ivan nodding in approval to their reverence.

“Welcome, I’m glad you have arrived as safely as we all hoped. I assume everything went well on the boat ride.” Ivan changed his gaze to the crew, who all instantly bowed in a sudden shake.

“We did what we best could for their highnesses,” Martin was the only one who dared speak for now, and the rest really appreciated him for it.

“Very well then, you have fulfilled a crucial mission. We shall continue onward until we reach the palace. My deepest thanks for what you did for them.” Ivan gave them a bow in gratitude, while the rest only brought themselves more to the floor, only to stand once again when Ivan settled his horse away to prepare the group’s departure.

Already men were ushering Ludwig and Feliciano to move forward, but Feliciano refused to without saying goodbye. He turned to the crew and he hugged them all by turn, thanking them for everything they did, the music, the dancing, the food, the jokes and the smiles, hoping they could one day meet again for the same things. It was a routine Ludwig had settled himself in doing, but with shakes and small smiles, even if how distant he had been that entire boat ride.

Horses were brought over to them, as richly decorated as the rest, these ones specifically with green Heartian symbols, prepared and awaited. Feliciano knew these animals must be just as beautiful underneath all this weight, which made him feel bad, caressing and wording them all kinds of comfort for what they had to do for them. They were asked to simply mount, both Ludwig and Feliciano not expecting to be so out in the open for one of the last parts of their journey, but they obeyed, picking their horses, waving goodbye to the others and reaching by Ivan’s side, who was awaiting them by the stone of the rest of the port, citizens walking by, of course crowds stopping to stare, to point, whistle and hope for a chance to be greeted by any of the royals present.

“No carriage?” Ludwig finally worded.

“It would only stall us more, we can’t afford to lose more time. You’re both way later than we had scheduled. Riding ourselves by horse is much quicker, which is why we brought these guards and soldiers for extra protection,” Ivan seemed to scold.

“I thought you had received letters of all our kinds of predicaments,” Ludwig tried to excuse.

“We did, it just drove us more impatient, but come along, we must depart immediately. The palace is awaiting our arrival for tomorrow in the afternoon.” How could he say that with such a tranquil smile while also intending business, driving his horse around and already starting a fast pace out of the port and city, one Ludwig and Feliciano were forced to follow with the rest of the men.

Nothing covered them from the air and dust that rose, in true to nature and to its real radius. It was a similar hurry like the one from Shanghai to Washington, a nonstop that refused to give victory to any kind of exhaustion or dwindling.

It was truly as the books have written, as the arts depicted, a continuous thick green wall of darkness and mystery that would go on with different kinds of wonders to see in their depths, covering quaint single houses, villages, impressive tall churches like the very trees had carved them, humans decorating with the metals and jewels they found surely easy at the shores of rivers and lakes. The only time Feliciano could sketch was on their night stop in Petrozavodsk, trying to pour all the scenes in his sketchbook, noticing that he had very few pages left to complete the full book and coming into the realization that he needed to limit himself for what was left of the journey. How could he when there was a plethora in every corner his eyes landed on.

He thought about perhaps buying a new sketchbook. They were not that far from a city center and it wouldn't take too long, maybe if he asked Ludwig- that's when he remembered…he was given a different tent, Feliciano having his own at the moment, empty with none of Ludwig's belongings, only Pookie resting away at the top of one of his cloaks. It was the first time throughout the journey they had been given separate resting places, intensifying the loneliness and fault Feliciano had felt from Ludwig ever since they left Washington. He wanted to hope that it was just because they had extra tents that needed to be used, that maybe Ludwig just needed some sort of lonely mediation for the night before things returned to the blooming chance they had so tightly on their grasps lately.

With a sigh, a close of his sketchbook that he tucked back into one of his bags, he blew the lantern shut and focused solely on sleeping, not on this emptiness, not in this worry.

Without another delay they hurried off the next morning in the same pace as the day before, only a small breakfast to spare and lunch to be taken as they rode. Moscow was their next stop, nearer and nearer as the populace expanded around them, activity growing, more buildings and landmarks appearing between the heavy greenery. Finally Feliciano could spot the expanse of the palace from a distance, the pacing slowed, everyone in the group could relax, except the guards, who now took extra vigilance as they covered well around the arising monarchs. It was just as the crowds around them grew, as the whole city headed out, chanting, congratulating and celebrating their awaited arrival.

Feliciano could barely hear any words spoken by the guards, Ludwig or even Ivan, as all these unknown Russian words were shouted and screamed between the streets, by the rivers, by the squares, and all Feliciano could do was just wave and smile politely while also taking into his sights the beauty this new city had to offer. He was impressed with the perfect blend of city and landscape, everything intended to be covered well in some kind of greenery, but showcasing intricate towers, domes and details that showed the presence of human build and progress. The closer they got to the palace, the more noise reigned, the more packed the crowds became and more guards were sent to offer better protection. Drums were banged, trumpets blew and special flags fell upon the main doors and windows of the palace, all with

Heartian symbols, in warm welcome to the foreign royals that kept trying harder to make their way between the crushing multitudes.

This was officially the biggest welcome they had received, reminding them of their power, of their worth, especially with this journey, what they had accomplished, the news they made, what it meant to finally arrive to the last kingdom and what was coming next.

Feliciano admired how Ludwig could remain with his stoic expression, gaze onward to nothing but the palace, with a glare as if he was meeting with a long enemy. He was uncaring to the action surrounding him, unlike Feliciano who was drowning in it, trying to properly greet as many as he could.

Finally they passed through the frontal gates of the palace, where crowds still cheered, the guards having to force a good pathway for them to strode along on their horses, with not enough space seeing there was a long pond and fountain depicting an ace scene, so beautifully sculpted that it took Feliciano's sudden attention, until new trumpets bellowed and forced Feliciano to look onward.

A large smile, giddiness, he was ready to jump from his horse and offer her the biggest hug, but there were still so many people surrounding them, plus the presentation called for more dignity and control.

Elizabeta found herself in the same excitements, having to control any urges of her own embraces and kisses by keeping her hands behind her and standing in grace, biting into her lips to not let herself shrill and shout to Feliciano in more familiar welcomes. It was quite endearing, Roderich had to admit as he stood beside her, sporting a smile with just the same intent and it only brought Feliciano with more urge to scream and bring them both into a powerful crush of arms.

Ivan dismounted his horse, followed by Ludwig and so Feliciano took his queue, seeing as the guards provided a space for them to finally walk, going up the large marbled frontal stairs until they reached the very platform Roderich and Elizabeta stood in, waiting along with other officials.

Once they were all presented properly before each other, the crowds fell silent, clear as to not even let the royals say a word against it.

With an extend of her arms, as if pointing to the magnificence of her entire city, Elizabeta bellowed: "Finally, welcome to Moscow!"

The crowds cheered, Ludwig and Feliciano bowed, and Ivan took his side by his own ruling companions.

"With us holds the last of the Validity Spheres, and towards that direction," she pointed to a faraway bridge that led deeper into the kingdom, "is the field where we keep King Khaos prisoner, in the once remnants of the Black Kingdom, the last stop and the goal of the journey to place all Validity Spheres. Afterwards it is a journey home, with completion and resolution. In honor of your journey, of your collection of all Validity Spheres, of the placing and of your soon return home, we shall celebrate a grand ball in two days, the night before

your departure the next afternoon, with all welcomed to come." The crowds once again roared, jumping and clapping, growing eager as did Feliciano.

The three took synchronized bows to the crowds before they turned forward to the grand entrance of the palace, all ushering them inside, and so Ludwig and Feliciano entered into the richness and comfort of such a grand place.

It was as they walked, the three discussing information about the events that would take place in the next three days, did Feliciano notice that the Clubian palace was actually the smallest of the kingdom castles. Sure, it was still large, it had richness, amazing architecture art, golds, silvers, arches, domes, murals showing wonderful sculpted designs, paintings, and shinning floors and windows that guided light to enter in an enchanting glow. Servants moved pass them in the usual rhythm of work of any castle, all the commotion happening outside shushed out by these powerful walls, yet it was somehow humble and modest, they were probably already walking its entire length, an easy access to everything that made Feliciano more confident in making his way around.

"-as for rooming, we chose for you two the Pasternak room, it has a beautiful view to our gardens and it's the most perfect spot in the entire palace for a cup of tea," Roderich told.

"About that, if I may ask," Ludwig suddenly halted, coughing, taking a better stance, hoping his request could be taken more seriously, "can you leave that room for Feliciano? I request to have another room separate from my arising queen."

It was an odd request they had not expected, for all three to gaze to each other wondering if it was possible to be done at such a short notice, all while all kinds of crashes happened in Feliciano's heart, trying not to let his face fall, trying to be uncaring, focusing on a painting of a spring day on the ceiling and not on any of his inner tearings.

"May we ask for a proper reason?" Ivan wondered.

"I need a separate spot to relax and think. The journey has exhausted me and I would want proper rest before we head to the field," he excused, a forced trained look in his eyes, clearly hiding, clearly holding and even begging.

Elizabeta and Roderich looked with question towards their King, who then nodded in acceptance once the silence was prolonged enough.

"Very well then, I'll have the servants prepare the Svantovit room, it's on an opposite wing from here, private and guarded. I'm sure no one will come bother you." To Feliciano it just helped to create more walls, to see him further and unapproachable.

"Thank you," Ludwig bowed and they continued on with a tour of the castle, a brilliance that wasn't enough of a light to have Feliciano rising.

Feliciano was used to exploring new cities with Ludwig, and even with his reluctance, his retreats and indifference, somehow a chat always escaped, a smile, a wonder, a growing

string that was pulling them together once again. This time though, Feliciano explored Moscow with only Elizabeta's guidance. Sure, Elizabeta managed to make him smile, bring him eager in taking every building, every shop, every bakery, restaurant, bridge, square, river, passing boats and carriages, but she noticed that it wasn't enough to really make him attentive, to have his special glow and smile.

He brought his coloring pencils and sketchbook with him, yet he only managed a single drawing of one of the crowded squares, the rest of the pages only receiving pencil taps as Feliciano spent the day lost in his thoughts, a thread that Elizabeta could not accomplish to break him out of.

In those two days he saw no sign of Ludwig, not vagabonding through the halls, not on a break, not on a reading, he didn't even join them for breakfast and dinner. Feliciano didn't actually spot him until the ball.

What grandeur, what people and dresses, what grace of movements and festivity. For a moment he could lose himself in that new rhythm, in that dream as he swayed in green for the occasion.

It was tight around his waist, loose sleeves and front, revealing shoulders and part of his chest, an act that didn't sit well with Roderich when he first saw him come out of his room that evening. The front had an excellent embroider of silver, gold and jewels, matching with symbols on his sleeves, belt, side of his tight pants and boots. He felt handsome, he knew he had surely gotten plenty of eyes, granting many a dream dance, both to men and women who had been worthy partners that Feliciano did not mind at all loosing himself with for the night. He danced with Elizabeta, he danced with Roderich, even with Ivan, who complimented and admired how dashing Feliciano looked in that green. He received similar comments from many others, who he smiled to and thanked, complimenting them as well, but they weren't the one he wanted to hear it from the most, they weren't the eyes he wanted to catch and they weren't the arms of the person he truly wanted to dance with.

Ludwig was but a shadow throughout the whole feast, staying by the sides away from the dancing and commotion, having drinks and taking from the snacks. He occasionally spoke to groups eager to meet and have a chat with him, but he barely responded with words, only bows, nods and huffs before they continued with their laughing and joyful conversations with other groups. The only time Feliciano saw him actually have a proper long conversation was at the beginning with Roderich and later then with Ivan just as he had finished his dancing with the arising queen.

Feliciano had taken his break to have his own drink and snack, enjoying in a small chat with a lovely young woman when a certain melody began to play. Elizabeta had mentioned that it would signify the coming closing to the ball, in other words one of the last chances for a dance, a beautiful song just perfect, with no one else to share it but with Ludwig.

Ivan headed off to chat with other officials, while Roderich took the chance to have Elizabeta in a lovely dance, one Feliciano was eager to be a part of, and so with a deep breath he bravely settled towards Ludwig's direction. He was standing by himself, gazing over to a view of the frontal gates of the palace and into the city…specifically to that bridge, the one he knew they would be taking the next afternoon in direction to the field. Ludwig had

managed to block out any kind of sounds, any kind of lingering presence of guests, even Feliciano's close approach, his heavy stare on him, delightful breaths that called, that made him weak enough to actually turn to him.

"What?" He demanded.

"Oh um just um…" now Feliciano didn't know how to speak, how to compose, "saw you here and I wanted to know if you were okay."

"I'm all right," Ludwig simply answered, turning his gaze back to the view.

"Are you really?" Feliciano dared question, leaning, a closeness that was like him joining in the blocking, truly separating themselves from the commotion behind them.

"As always, you shouldn't fret about it," Ludwig answered, distracting himself in the sip of his drink.

"I will fret because I'm worried about you," he dared say, a response that had Ludwig surprise, a widen expression that Feliciano didn't miss.

"Tell me…what's going on?" He tried, he called, he hoped, a closure that surely touched, that he knew had been a glimpse for something from Ludwig, but he quickly shut it off before it enlarged, turning completely away to face the wall he rested on. Nothing, Feliciano knew he was not going to get anything.

He turned to gaze to the dancing guest, happily twirling and flying unaware of the two royals who at the moment had no such liveliness…but Feliciano was still willing to try.

"If you're not going to tell me, at least um…" he caught his attention, he had to be quick, he had to say it before he became any more nervous, "dance with me."

He really tried out his most confident smile, but it was slowly faltering, worsening by every second Ludwig's heavy stare on him continued. He finished his drink, leaving it discarded on a near empty tray, turning away, standing apart from the wall with clear direction in wanting to head out.

"I would rather not," he admitted coldly, beginning a pace to move outside, uncaring to whatever turmoil Feliciano met.

"Why?" Feliciano demanded to know, halting Ludwig from continuing onward, command enough in his voice for Ludwig to be obedient enough to hear.

"We can't," he simply said.

"Why can't we?"

"We just can't!"

"For fuck's sakes Ludwig!" Feliciano exploded. He couldn't deal, he couldn't hold, the crashing was slowly starting to show and pour out. Ludwig admittedly stiffed at hearing such

harsh words leave Feliciano's mouth, a piercing enough that was beginning to even hurt.

"For once…for fucking once, just tell me what's going on, don't keep hiding this, don't keep distancing yourself away from me …it's hurting…it's hurting so much and it has to be hurting you too. I can't stand to be treated like this any longer and I can't stand to continue watching you suffer alone through this, please!" His voice broke, tears verged and yet Feliciano managed in walking towards him, hoping to reach more silence and peace between them for a chance of speech.

"Please…please… tell me," he silently begged, the first trails falling down his cheeks.

Ludwig turned to him, meeting this mess and yet utter indifference remained in his eyes, which only worsened Feliciano, only made him weaker.

"Please…" Feliciano wished once again, falling into desperation.

A breath, a sigh, a whispered "I'm sorry" and Ludwig moved away, into darkness, in silence, in no reply, in no running back to console and promise.

"Please…please…" yet Feliciano kept on hoping, but no words were returned to him, he was left on this terrace alone, the only comfort but the blowing breeze.

Ludwig just left, he just left like that without a care, without an explanation, securing what Feliciano had so much tried to deny the last few days. The realization shook him, uncontrollable tears now washing all over his face, working in the trembling, in the falling.

Laughter still continued in the feast, one Elizabeta was coming out from in a splendorous smile.

"Feliciano, there you are, I was meaning to-" she saw, she noticed.

"Feliciano…" she extended a hand, she eased and like the tumbling of a tall tree, Feliciano fell right into her arms in the large breaking of a sob, of whimpers, of continuous shakes, drenching Elizabeta's dress in his misery.

"Feliciano, Feliciano, Feliciano," she repeated, cradling and letting him in his release, hands running through his hair, his arms, his back, seeing him as small as that baby she had met along ago. She didn't word anything else but his name, shushing, caressing, holding him close, letting him in this break, understanding what was going on by knowing who just left, the concerns Feliciano had worded in their stroll through Moscow, not knowing what to do but just let themselves lay on the floors of the terrace to swim in this disarray. Roderich had spotted them this way and came close, clear concern in his eyes along with question directed towards Elizabeta. She didn't know how to answer, she only opened her mouth expecting to say something but she couldn't, she really did not know what to say. Ivan passed and noticed as well, only staring, surely asking Roderich for answers that he didn't have.

All this just made it heavier for the three of them, knowing what was coming tonight.

It was dark, the activities of the ball now long gone, the palace in somber silence as it should be expected of in such late hours. Yet here Feliciano was still awake, still teary eyed, laying across the rich couch in his ball clothes, with not enough interest in changing into his night ones and sleeping, curtains open to reveal the splendor of the garden. It looked gorgeous, a sculptured scene of fauna that surely would have had him smiling, sketching away on his book, going on with words, compliments and stories to Pookie. The same melancholy remained in his expression with no joy or glow, his eyes, although in direction to the garden, were distracted and lost, the trace of tears still evident under his eyes and cheeks, his sketchbook still tucked in his bag, Pookie cuddling, nuzzling and purring, trying to find ways to help him feel better, but nothing did the trick, nothing seemed to awake him from this fall.

So entranced he was he didn't notice the eyes that were watching him, Elizabeta's holding the most concerned, only leaving a crack to spot, hoping the light of the torch she held wouldn't be enough to disturb him. It pained her, there was a slight tremble to the hold she had, hoping she could just let all of this fall, go in there and give him all the embraces he needed until he was back to his normal sunshine self.

"Can't we tell him another day?" She asked Roderich and Ivan, who each stood by her side holding the same torches, the same seriousness and determination locked in their eyes, in their chest, in their breaths, the prepared tones and approaches that they had long ago set ready for this day.

"Elizabeta, the writings made the instructions clear, we're supposed to tell him tonight," Roderich reminded.

"We're already late as we are, we cannot stall this much longer," Ivan joined.

"But he's not well…he's hurt, if we tell him this now… I don't know if it would only get him to feel worst," she still worried.

"He'll have to deal with it, Elizabeta. There is a lot at stake, meaning more than what is going through his heart and mind," Ivan interjected, ushering and nodding.

It had to happen, it had to be told and shown, and so in turn Elizabeta nodded, taking a sigh, breathing in, gathering that strength to begin, starting with the slow push she gave to the door.

This new single line of light that entered was enough to disturb the darkness Feliciano had adjusted to. He turned and clear in the door was Elizabeta, dressed as regally as she had been for the ball, a proud crown, shinning…and a large torch in her hands. He squinted at it, wondering why it was that Elizabeta had brought something so bright and disturbing to his room, especially in the state he was in. If she was meaning to console him, coming in dressed like she was on her way to a trial and holding an intimidatingly bright burning torch was not the way to do so.

"Feliciano…" she called almost in a whisper, a slight tremble in her tone that made Feliciano stir in worry.

“Yes?” He began to rise, Pookie looking just as worried and taking a securing grasp on Feliciano’s shoulder.

“You…have to come with us, there’s… something we have to show you.”

The silence that continued was eerie, one that made Feliciano hesitant in the steps he took to come closer, finally noticing that Ivan and Roderich joined her with the same regal clothing and torches. Once he reached outside into the hall, door closed behind him to no escape, did Ivan and Roderich nod and began making their way down the empty and silent halls.

“Come on,” Elizabeta simply told him, ushering him to follow them across their traverse through the palace.

No words were exchanged during the process, the palace seeming dead at these late hours, the only sound those of their footsteps, echoing quite tauntingly in the air, making Feliciano tremble the more.

“What are you going to show me?”

“Soon enough,” Elizabeta answered.

“But what exactly?”

“Something…something that all the kingdoms should have known the moment you were born,” she admitted as much, which drove Feliciano to widen his eyes and worry the more, trembling in nervous excitement.

“Shouldn’t…Ludwig be with us then?” He reminded.

“We think he already knows,” Roderich finally said something, just as they stopped before an old tapestry.

They had reached a centering hall in the palace, one that barely saw any presence of even servants, only the three of them, who shared knowing signals, Ivan offering to move the tapestry aside to show a plain wall. Roderich then moved closer, placing a hand on it, uttering a quiet spell under his breath, letting all watch as the wall rippled in disappearance until a whole new hall was shown, much to Feliciano’s deep impression. The Club royals were by now indifferent to it, having been enough times through this hall to know, readily making their way while Feliciano remained fearful outside, having to be pushed by Pookie to be able to continue alongside them.

This hall went on in sudden steps in a downward direction, although not seeming as so with the rich decorations that stood. It was rather dusty, older things that must have been left behind decades ago, the style of back then, with paintings, rugs, tapestries, even sculpted designs to match. To Feliciano it was somehow like turning back in time. It was also really dark and having the torches really aided in the steps he took, especially since staircases could appear out of nowhere. Feliciano swore he would trip at some point, especially with how long it continued, surely minutes passing by before they stopped under the largeness of a very ancient door, contrasting greatly with the newer walls that offered its standing. The closer

Feliciano came and the more the torches lite up, he began to notice that the great symbol that was presented was actually a very old Heartian symbol, quite weird to see in the old halls of a Clubian palace.

They didn't open anything, they still remained silent, yet they turned to Feliciano… expecting.

"Huh?" He questioned.

"You have to open it," Ivan said as if it was obvious.

"How?" He didn't see any lock or handle on it.

"We don't know," Elizabeta had to admit.

"The writings just say that you have to open it," Roderich added.

"I thought you had already been through here."

"We haven't," Ivan said.

"Nobody has in centuries," Elizabeta said.

It only brought Feliciano with more question, gazing over to the door, not aiding at all with the still present confusion. "Then…how do know you're supposed to show me something? Do you even know what's in there?"

"Writings," Roderich said as if it could clear enough, but Feliciano gazed on rather incredulous to it.

"King Yura, Queen Adrian and Jack Anikó left behind a series of scrolls, pamphlets and letters in a special chest, closed for centuries…until you were born," Elizabeta wanted to start clearing.

Feliciano's eyes widened at the mention of those names, scared to the connection that it meant to his birth. They were the three who had been rulers of Clubs back for the war of the darkened decades. He knew they aided in the battles to subjugate Khaos, following his great grandfather Romulus.

"It was all instructions for us, the rulers for when you would be passing through here for the delivery of the Validity Spheres, when they understood you will be ready to see this," Elizabeta continued to explain, her gaze just as curious to the door, wondering if she would truly see in there what she had read.

"We know because they detailed exactly the contents of this room. We were instructed to be able to explain it to you the night before you left to the fields, to be guides and give support to how you might react. They drew pictures and gave as many clarifications as they could, we just hope it's enough," Ivan said, wanting to be as trusting.

Although all this just made more tension arise in Feliciano, he still nodded, he still faced the door, now more curious than ever, nervous of course, but if this was something meant for him to see, he knew he had to enter, move across, perhaps to finally be given some new set of answers.

Although there was no handle, no keyhole, no specific mark, he settled with simply placing both his hands upon the cool and hard texture, shutting his eyes and settling with a simple release of power, something he had managed to learn and control in his recent dedication to his power practicing.

A response was quickly met, an unlocking that even surprised the other three back, worried over what might be released in the instant. Lines began to glow in a fiery red, a whistle, the start of a song seem to be heard before it quickly disappeared with an acceptance. Ancient slabs moved for the first time in hundreds of years, grinding harshly until an opening was met, enough for the three to pass through, ready as all glows in the door hushed, waiting. The space between was dark, a void that made even Ivan fearsome in entering, the three staring for the longest while at Feliciano hoping he could take the first step, but he himself was petrified to the spot, like it was a looming monster ready to take him.

Elizabeta, impatient, took a deep breath and was the first to move forward, extending her torch to give it the first glimpse of light in years. Nothing was shown but the height of the ceiling, no walls, only but old humid stone spiral stairs that continued downward, to a reach that not even the combination of the three torches was enough to clear.

“Come along,” Ivan led. They were still confident of what was down there and were meaning to reach it.

“Watch your step Feliciano,” Elizabeta warned lastly.

Feliciano finally came in, the air heavy, dusty, ancient, the weight of all the years seeming to crash on him, it only made him more scared, and like a child he actually found himself holding to Elizabeta’s hand as they began their descend.

As soon as they settled off, they didn’t distract themselves in any kind of stop, only staring back to Feliciano from time to time to make sure he was with them, that he was calm, still holding tightly to the queen.

The deeper they went, the more the echoes of their steps resounded, somehow making this room larger, more intimidating, more mysterious and fearsome, hours seeming to pass of their continuous descend and nothing, nothing, nothing.

Was there really something down here? Feliciano was beginning to question as they took more steps and yet nothing was shown, the same surroundings, the same sounds and growing darkness, until finally a wall seemed to be formed, introducing them into a spiral motion of the same. This meeting wall was of the same build of the stairs they had been walking on for minutes, just as humid, just as hard as Feliciano extended his hand to touch, somehow relieved to have something surrounding him instead of bleak darkness. Now it was dealing with this smaller spiral motion, dizzying and tumbling, Feliciano so disorientated that he let go of Elizabeta to stop and relieve himself, to breathe, to rub into his head, focusing his

vision and headaches. As he extended his hand to hold himself to the wall to continue following the rest, he didn't come into contact with hard rocky texture but the smoothness of old marble. His eyes followed and he saw a small image, one of a sculptured woman seeming to fly on some current, a hand extended as if she was holding a bow, her aim directed at the figure of a man falling under her defeat. For something so small it looked quite nice, in an old Heartian style, surely from the Grecian province, telling a sort of story no doubt.

As he moved his hand about hoping there would be more, his hands met instead the starting of a wave of blue mosaics, growing, turning, spreading around the tunnel that they all began to enter. The light of the torches made it alight wonderfully, the large image of a city, at the bottom a union of all kinds of citizens, seeming to gaze forward to the spectator, all their chest alighted in one single light, connected to one figure shinning high above all, in her chest the biggest of those lights that she seemed to spread. Beautiful, Spadian, surely from the Indian province.

As they moved around it, a particular star formation shinning right behind the figure caught Feliciano's eye, recognizing it as the very one that had been designed in all the floors of the castle and palace throne rooms…it was the first time he saw that symbol outside of them.

As they exited that design, they met with several others telling the same story, of the same woman reigning, offering this kind of light with the same stars in her background, decorated in different kinds of glass, crystals and stones. Feliciano saw it in the form of different cultures, like Arabic ones of the Diamond Kingdom, forms of the Oralee in the Spade Kingdom, jades of the Japanese province in Hearts and gems of the Austrian province in Clubs.

Slowly it turned into paintings, this tunnel space beginning to elongate to showcase more and more and more, an array of stories, of scenes, of the same woman, in different forms, colors, shapes, made by different kinds of people, all of different provinces and kingdoms, but somehow Feliciano knew they were all drawing the same person…especially when she always held the same Heartian symbols, sometimes accompanied with a powerful and large St. Mark.

The paintings showed activities such as her as a child, with a group of angels, of running in white fields of surely the past white kingdom, others she was with the presence of a man of darkness, ultimate distaste shown in her facial expression. There were ones of imperial power that made her stand largely, of offering a shine to crowds, of crowds offering to her, of immense power flowing from her, as if creating the winds, the seas, the stars or taking part in the actions of battles, of fierceness, in the feast of blood, of weapons, seeming directed at the same male.

Along with the St. Mark, the same weapon was always in her hands…but was it a bow or even…a harp? Was she actually using a harp to reflect so much power? Feliciano questioned, truly enamored with the idea, remembering how he himself had made a harp bow when his power first got activated. Then there were the ones of her with a beloved, Feliciano knowing with so much dedication given to their gazes, a symbol of intensity always used, stars coating their kiss, embraces in passion, a love true and intense, no other kind repeated in the images she appeared alongside three others and other two always coated in darks and whites.

Feliciano was so distracted with the ceiling and the walls that he had almost stumbled with a statue, noticing then several others covering the floor they had reached. It was as the rest, of the woman in different poses, forms, materials, the same symbols of Hearts, but yet in styles of different kingdoms. There were small ones, large ones, fountains, even designs in small little rocks, all expanding until they reached an area of walls, of murals, of even buildings and temples. The same story was shown in their walls, in their gates, whatever space needed to tell its fullness. They grew larger and larger, points that Feliciano's eyesight couldn't reach, an array of colors and presence of kingdoms that lost Feliciano for a moment on the fact that they were still in Clubian ground. As he turned, as he looked away, as he let himself get lost in the maze, he distracted in the form of this woman with her harp bow and St. Mark, defending, a story that he was more than curious to know about the deeper he came, with what all the figures, people and angels she appeared with, in dances, in love, in friendship, in war, in peace. His back knocked against a wall in his leisure, a glow of colors meeting him, turning to see quite a temple, coated in all kinds of shinning rocks, in diamonds and gold and jades and emeralds, of course depicting scenes of the woman, yet there was something different…yet also familiar about this temple as he realized. There was the typical image of her ruling, high above what seemed a representation of all four kingdoms, harp bow and St. Mark with her. As Feliciano spun around its radius, he met the same star formation, the reigning of a man in darkness, destroying, in his hand a light, then there was the image of another man, on his knees, offering, a sort of power reigning from him and then lastly…a sudden image of a baby, shinning in a warm Italian village in Hearts…much like his own. Feliciano found himself looking closely towards it, the scene and all too familiar one.

"That's supposed to represent you," Roderich suddenly interrupted, making Feliciano jump. He had almost forgotten he was with them.

"Me-Me?" Feliciano still questioned, but as he gazed more strongly, he realized that the village presented…was actually Barga, his birthplace and where he grew up in. The baby didn't hold any exact characteristics that reminded of himself, but the connection to his village and the more current Heart symbols made it more prominent…yet why? Why did he appear in this temple that was surely erected countless of decades before his birth?

"What is this?" Feliciano questioned.

"You went to Diamonds didn't you?"

"Yes?"

"Did you hear about Hosni and Zubaida's temple?"

And that's when it clicked, that's when he remembered, the words of Haris from weeks ago, his story connecting and making him realize.

"This is it!" He couldn't believe.

To most Diamond citizens it had been considered destroyed, lost, yet here it was, in perfect condition, as beautifully and filled in the enchanted rocks as they had told him. He was almost breathless as he touched, admiring, but with more weight, more question.

“Do you know of the tapestries of Jerrod?”

“Yes, lost, the creation of a Spadian queen.”

“They’re all here,” and Roderich pointed to the immensity of tapestries showing the same stories, the star formation, the bow harp, the St. Mark, the baby he knew was himself, the image of destruction, of a man, of a woman reigning over all four kingdoms. Feliciano almost fainted as he stood closer, near to falling down to the floor to bow in respect to something so rare and worthy.

“About the Lore Templar?”

“It’s here?”

Roderich pointed to a roundabout of pillars, each holding a different statue, all pointing and connected to a center of stars, which held a baby, this one with more form but looking nothing like Feliciano, who stumbled as he came into contact with it, widened and trembling.

“The Verissimus chart?”

“Oh gods…”

“Here,” and Roderich pointed to the circular large shield hanging above them, this one a more precise descriptions of the stars, of dates, a calendar, constellations, at its side the symbols of the woman.

“Roderich, we found it,” Ivan called from deep within the maze of relics, hidden well from them but luckily they could still see the glow of their torches.

“We’re on our way,” Roderich called back, ushering Feliciano to join him.

“Feliciano, we’re soon going to explain everything that is here, a story that has to do greatly with the past, but also with the coming future, but before any of that, we’re going to show you…a specific mural.” It was right into the next coming entrance, but they both suddenly faltered in going, surely nervous and trembling.

After Elizabeta had taken her look, she moved back to join them, giving them an assuring smile. Before they came into the discovery, Roderich moved in front of Feliciano, taking his breathes before he continued.

“This mural…was created by Pisa herself, which holds an exact image of this… woman,” Roderich looked around the room to assure Feliciano it was the woman that was well worshiped all throughout this cave.

“It was made back when they could still share a plain, in honor of what…we shall explain soon enough,” was the last warning Roderich could give. He nodded to Elizabeta and she offered her arm for Feliciano to take.

With barely any breath, clearly shaking and fearing, Feliciano tried to swallow it all, trying to calm his air and body, Pookie nuzzled into his neck in assurance and Feliciano petted him,

the act giving him some sort of bravery.

Slowly and in hesitance, he took Elizabeta's arm, who took her own breath before she led Feliciano forward, Ivan already standing before it giving enough light for Feliciano to admire, to truly see and analyze.

It was tall, to compare to the majesty of the entrance to a palace, the art in it truly a masterpiece worthy of someone as god-like as Pisa. It was all marble, plain and white, but the figures represented there as clear as if they were actual giants standing before the four. As he explored, he noticed that a top chunk of it was not there. As he imagined what could be missing, he suddenly remembered the Luna Rani Academy…the empty case. Was this…was this…?

The missing piece fitted perfectly, having cut the head of the person who took part in this small mentioning. It wasn't a big part, but still, this was it, this was the mural the university was looking for, gripping harder to Elizabeta as he realized.

Deciding to continue the exploration of his gaze, he noticed that all the figures held a story in the bottom of their robes or above them in their items. They were of creation, of childhood and of rebellion, continuing in an order with each of the six people represented. One held the symbol of the White Kingdom, one the Black Kingdom, one the Club Kingdom, one the Spade Kingdom, another the Diamond Kingdom and finishing in the center with a woman who held the Heart Kingdom. When Feliciano's eyes fell on her, he instantly gasped, he brought a hand to his chest, his heart beating so fast it verged on exploding out to join with the surprise and bewilderment.

The curls, the facial features, the same glow that was in his golden eyes, even her stance and how her long hair fell…an uncanny resemblance to those of his family, more so than any paintings of Romulus.

His grandfather had something from her, his brother, his aunts, his uncles, his cousins, especially his mother, especially…himself.

The mural made it obvious that this woman was a Valenti.

"Wha-what-what-wha-what…what?" Feliciano's breaths continued in an unease, heavier, making him even dizzy, thanking the fact that he held to Elizabeta to not completely loose himself.

She took it upon herself to officially tell him.

"This woman is your great grandmother, Feliciano. Augusta, the Ace of Hearts."

Chapter 46

Chapter Notes

> Now this is actually the longest chapter :'D Another chapter I enjoyed writing and with a lot of information and I actually really recommend you skim through the story because a lot of details are put into play that most of you would have probably forgotten by now. Never the less, I hope you enjoy! This one is one of my favorite chapters and I was really excited to write it (There are many others I have in mind that I haven't gotten to though, so expect them ;)).

Feliciano groaned into the cover of his hands, a whimpering that had the three club royals wondering if he was crying, but one breath made them see that he wasn't, just stressed, just a lot that he was slowly trying to make due with.

Feliciano was the only one who took sitting in the fall of a ruined pillar that belonged to another mural, the weight too much to make him stand, behind him the image of who he knew now as Augusta, with her own St. Mark, riding across a beautiful starry night sky.

"Augusta…Augusta, my great grandmother, Romulus's wife, the last Italian queen of hearts before me, was the Ace of Hearts! She was the Ace of Hearts!" Feliciano seemed to keep wallowing, finding it hard to accept, to realize, only bringing him more question. He tried to connect in his mind, but some strings were still left hanging, some stories just didn't mend with others, everything in this cave a proof.

"Yes, yes she was Feliciano," Roderich assured him, joining the other three in calm expressions, all surrounding him, offering what they could in comforting words.

"But-but-but how? Why? How could she be a goddess? How could she also be a queen? How was she with my great grandfather? What are all these things? Why was it so important for me to know? Why do I appear in these images? What are those stars? What is that light she holds? Why is everything hidden here? Why didn't I know? Why didn't I know who Augusta is? Why did-" he streamed, quickly getting agitated, shaking, beginning to stand in a disarray that all three feared would just make him fall, disorientate and even faint. The three had to push him back into his sitting, wishing they would have brought some water to calm him down, but all they could do for now was sit with him, offer caresses to his back and arms, hoping they could steady his breathing and concentration.

"Feliciano, calm down," Roderich tried.

"Calm down? I found out my great grandmother is a goddess, that the line of my family is of demi-gods and you want me to calm down?" Feliciano maddened. "I can't, not when I have so many questions that need answers to!"

Elizabeta shushed him in a harsh grip, forcing him into shutting. “That’s what were here for Feliciano, to answer and explain everything that’s surrounding you,” she assured kindly. But it was so much, so much, a raining force that continued to fall heavily on the arising queen, so much to question and point, so much to hear and know. It was overwhelming him to a shock, to a paralyze of all his body that only continued to worry the three.

“How…-where do I even start?” Feliciano slumped in his stress, trying to rub the pain in his head away.

“How about…we just tell you everything…from the very beginning,” Roderich thought he could suggest, enough of a calm for Feliciano to sit straight, to be more open and ready, bringing them all more confidence to begin.

The three looked among each other wondering who could start, and so Ivan decided he was best, now that he was already standing before them, making his way to another wall covered by a large red wine curtain in the very encirclement.

“Feliciano…do you know the story of creation?” He asked without really looking at him, his hands taking the fabric of this curtain as he waited for his response.

It was a well repeated question from his teachings, from what he knew ever since he was a small child, so of course he answered like he was used to. “Ye-yes. The four aces created the four kingdoms to their image, the black and white kingdom as ones of union.”

“Wrong,” Ivan already decreed, which startled Feliciano.

In that moment, Ivan pulled the large curtain, letting it fall to ancient grounds so a whole new mural was shown. Not as tall as the one Pisa had made, yet still big enough, only showing two figures, a woman of white and a man of darkness, divided in a sort of world of only their two.

“It was actually Pisa and Keron who created them,” Ivan admitted.

“Ke-keron?”

“Khaos’s original name before the war of the blackened decades,” Elizabeta said.

“…they’re the original gods?” Feliciano questioned with shock.

“Indeed. The writings say that the universe carved them in a process of decades, handing them ultimate power…and the hand of creation,” Roderich said, standing and pointing to the various images that held a light, the one Augusta held herself constantly throughout the cave.

“The hand of creation, as its name, is a fountain that gives ultimate power of creation to the holder. It was given to Keron and Pisa to share, but they didn’t do much with it, they simply created a space of their own, a small kingdom that they both shared and decided to live in solitude,” Elizabeta said, standing as she showed images of just the two of them, in their own sides, in their own riches, Feliciano following them as they told.

“At some point it became too lonely for them, and with that realization they set to test the true abilities of the hand of creation. They created the four Aces, Augusta being the very first one that they brought, along with Maiara, the Ace of Spades, Jabbar, the Ace of Diamonds and Artem, the Ace of Clubs.” Ivan moved them along to a mural showing the four Aces as little children, a sort of prophecy showing above them the representations of their own kingdoms.

“They were creations that they handed a semblance of power to, mainly to work as servants for them, each being handed their own group of angels to lead and help with the care of their small kingdoms and palaces,” Ivan showed tapestries of their order, of their angels, following under the same colors and forms the very Aces had been created in. “All held a grace of power and all the angels bowed before them as other gods, something that had made Keron extremely jealous, as so, it made him cruel to them. He lashed, he shouted, they suffered the anger of his power and thus they grew to be fearful of him…but Augusta…”

They moved to another mural of a child Augusta, in a beautiful dress, flowers in her hair, playing in a field of the first realm, with a smile that was much like Feliciano’s had been as a child.

“She was a very kind child, one who always found a way to remain with a joyful smile no matter the cruelness of Keron. She was imaginative, an artist, with a knack to create landscapes, buildings, images and stories to a world that she kept alive all through those first years. She learned to be a musician, especially after Pisa gifted her a harp, creating melodies, symphonies and lyrics to fill her spaces, having all come to sit and listen. She was dearly loved by all the other Aces, by the angels, by Pisa, who cared for her like a daughter…and even Keron learned to adore her.” Elizabeta told, but her tone at that last mentioning was sad, like the beginning of something that was going to go wrong. She showed a little statue of Keron holding to the shoulders of a young Augusta, not like the comfort of a father and daughter, but of the empowering of master subjugating his slave.

“Augusta’s skill continued to exceed, the other Aces began creating their own worlds to join, to discuss in their gatherings and go on with dream. She herself grew, and thus turned into a woman of ultimate beauty in the heavens,” Elizabeta pointed to a painting depicting her bloom, a charm that even made Feliciano sway, seeing her with new flowers, enchantingly beautiful dresses of red with countless symbols, flows and even stars of the universe.

“And Keron…he grew to want her, and being impatient as he was, he was not ready to refuse any kind of disagreements from her.”

There was a tapestry of Keron holding to her in a harsh grasp, his touch poisoning, an evil gleam and smile as he took a breath of her hair. Augusta in this image cringed for an escape, wanting to be as far away as possible from his lust, looking away, greatly scared, a fear Feliciano shared in, worried as he brought his hand forward as if to help her.

“He was not worthy to become her first husband, for he continued to be as selfish, as cruel, as indifferent to the suffering of the other Aces, of the angels, even Pisa.”

“But…couldn’t she do something?”

“Despite having a share in the hand of creation, Keron had more control and knowledge of it, fearsome things that Pisa was too scared to go against. She was part of the kneeling to his words and wishes, fearing to do anything to disappoint him and feel his wrath.”

They passed a tile only for him, showing his reign of evil, tyranny and lust for power.

“Augusta was forced to marry him, a union she detested and spent miserably in for many years. He barely allowed her time to paint, to play her music, to create, and she did not stand how cruel he treated everybody else in their small realm. No matter what she tried to do, nothing changed him, nothing convinced him, and it only helped for hatred to grow strongly in her.”

A mural of her despair, of her cries, of her reach…to the light, the hand of creation.

“As a gift, a token, a show of his supposed love and to earn more of her acceptance to him, Keron granted Augusta entrance and watch to the hand of creation.”

“Did she…take it then?” Feliciano wondered.

“Not yet,” Ivan told, lighting another mural, all of Augusta reading, fighting, swinging swords and fists along with firing arrows in a normal bow. “It was an immediate thought that came to her mind, but she knew she couldn’t act brashly about it. Being under Keron, she had access to all kinds of readings he had made about the hand, and so she studied them, she learned every use of it, how to balance her power correctly with it and how to let the light accept her as a new owner. Other than this, she prepared for the worst of Keron’s anger once he realized what she would do, and so she mastered herself in the weapons they held, in any kind of defense, in fight, in plans that she slowly spread to the rest, preparing them all for an assault.”

“And how did she do it?”

“Unlike anyone had though,” Elizabeta smiled, ushering them forward to quite a beautiful tapestry despite the scene that was meant to be depicted.

“There was a dress Keron adored watching her in, a particular red one that revealed too much of her body, yet it was rich, with an elegance that could match with the scene of a palace and of her stringing to the harp. She shone beautifully that day, playing along a harmonious melody that she found calm in, Keron so enamored that he couldn’t bother to scold her, for once just sitting down to listen, and with that last note, with that last pull of her string, she shot him with a blast of strong fire.”

And that was exactly what this tapestry showed. The borders, the scene of the palace and of the heavens was decorated excessively, in flowers, vines, damasks, even shines of silver and gold, exalting the centering image majestically. It showed Keron struck by the shot, while Augusta sat on with her harp, a string pulled back enough to show the evidence of her doing, an expression full of determination and fierceness that made Feliciano proud.

“This one has to be one of my favorites,” Elizabeta smiled, a hand on her hip as proud as if she herself had made the action.

“It didn’t rid him as they hoped though, it only wounded him slightly, but the time given was more than enough,” Roderich said as he lead them to another large painting, of Augusta leading a large groups of angels as if to battle, the light she held high reigning well in the scene.

“All the Aces, all the angels, even Pisa joined in the raid to destroy Keron’s palace and weaken his own angels, and in the disarray, Augusta took the hand of creation. The hand, having seen Augusta’s mind, her soul, her spirit, her heart, into her bravery, order, kindness and imagination, granted itself as her possession and thus she became the new ruler of the hand of creation.” Roderich then presented a large mural showing her holding of the light, the very light granting her a crown, imperial robes and universal dominion to do as she pleased.

“As celebration, and Augusta seeing the hand’s need to create as it was meant to, she followed its call and joined by the other Aces, they all together began to form our world.” Ivan pointed to another mural from an old Clubian temple of that process of creation. It showed Maiara, Ace of Spades, form the lines of the Spade Kingdom, her aid with the sea, the ocean and the moon. Jabbar, Ace of Diamonds, create the powder of the desserts of the Diamond Kingdom, the carve of its capital and shores, and an aid with the light of day and the strength of mountains. Artem, Ace of Clubs, in the growing of the Club Kingdom, taking the largest space, only deserving after he aided in the fortifying of forests, trees and all kinds of jewels to decorate. And Augusta, Ace of Hearts, surprisingly created the smallest kingdom of the four, to her want of art and music, and with the hand of creation she gave the final blessing.

They went inside this temple, a shine of mosaics showing her form the very first humans and animals, the other Aces continuing with their own imagination. It showed as Augusta created the movements of the seas, of the wind, of the strong energy of magic in the air, the passing of night and day, the flows… blessing this world for the first time with plentiful and gracious life.

“It’s thank to her, no matter what kingdom were from, that we are standing here, that we all move, think, feel, with intentions and differences that continue to help this world spin,” Roderich admitted as he moved them out of the temple and back to see other relics.

“But…what about Pisa and Khaos?” Feliciano asked.

“Pisa was given her own space to create what was later the White Kingdom, the true kingdom of union and peace that all four aces wanted to symbolize for her after the love and care she had given them in the first realm. She remained there in a human guise, living among us, around the time even creating the mural we first showed you.” Ivan pointed to a statue showing Pisa in her own creation as the rest.

“Khaos on the other hand,” Elizabeta then pointed her torch to the frescoes of a ceiling, showing a large spherical field covering a land of darkness, a symbolic meaning with having Khaos taking a throne seat in the mountains inside it. “Feliciano, the journey to get the validity spheres, the locked field where they keep Khaos…was not the outcome of the war of the blackened decades, it has been there for many more centuries before it."

“After the creation, after the Aces set the rules of order which proclaimed the kings, the queens and the jacks of their kingdom as watchers while they remained in their heaven, Khaos was taken prisoner.”

“In the…field?” Feliciano guessed.

“Yes,” Ivan continued, “the field is much older than we think, created by the very Aces instead of the rulers in the war of blackened decades as we had thought. You have to remember that Khaos is a god, older than the Aces, made by the universe instead of the hand of creation, as so, he’s powerful and it took a field of incredible power to be able to contain him, not in the heavens, but in our world, where his power can dwindle since he’s not exposed to the cosmic energy of the heavens, as well as caged in a human body. In there, he was granted the company of the angels who followed him, of even human creations that he made to obey to his command of tyranny, darkness and evil without the proper touch of the hand of creation.”

Now Feliciano understood their deathly and vicious aura that made them prominent if they stood outside the field.

“Now the field, it needs to keep running to keep him there, it needs continuous new energy every certain amount of time. The very first King, Queen and Jack of Hearts were the ones to offer this journey for the Aces, a duty that they set to continue on for generations in the ruling of the kingdom. They were accepted. The Kings, Queens and Jacks are the most powerful beings in our world since they are blessed with heavy power to compare to that of the Aces, they could accumulate more than enough power to keep energizing the field for centuries, a process that needed to be done at least every fifty years.” Ivan then light up a wall of metals showing the first ever journey for the Validity Spheres, the first ever created, even the first time humans placed them on the field in honor of the Aces.

Feliciano could identify King Fiorenzo, Queen Christa, their Jack being Rokurou at the time. Right by it there was a mural of Augusta handing the first ever empty crystal orbs to them from the heavens with a company of angels, which was a scene that awed Feliciano but had him staring in confusion. The Aces never presented themselves in their world.

“For many centuries, for many new generations of rulers, the world was a peaceful one, full of prosperity, an occasional conflict caused by Khaos’s men that they all did well to solve in their own ways. There was a good connection with the Aces and angels, their blessing and presence quite alive even if they denied themselves constant entering, just watching by the mirror and gates that were their portals, only used on the act to befall their decisions and changes.”

Gates that were constantly alive through different kind of stories of the Aces. A tapestry in the cave showed it exactly, intricately made, with flowers, jewels, columns and arches that would surely make any entire city envy.

From there on different stories of Augusta were presented throughout those years, like one of children spotting her play her harp in a hidden meadow, giving blessings to famous heroes of the kingdom, aiding them by sending storms or sunshine in their favor or joining them herself in battle, as well as appearing as a voice to help those that are troubling or helping to unite

lovers of impossibility. One of Feliciano's favorite had to be the one where she tamed a vicious and wild St. Mark that had been terrorizing a village, showing how she befriended it, giving it status of holiness and letting him join in the heavens by her side. From there on, her image was accompanied by him, along with the holiness of large wings to match her pet's, a sun crowned halo, a surrounding glow, symbols upon symbols moving and living like flowing blood on her skin, in the heights of her power, especially when she needed aid from the hand of creation.

"His name was Fabius," Elizabeta introduced.

"Is that…by any chance…Pookie?" Feliciano wondered, the little mentioned lion yawning that particular moment, still taking his rest upon Feliciano's shoulder as he had done this entire time.

"The writings did mention that one would come to your aid, but we do not think it's Fabius," Ivan said.

"There's a great chance that it might actually be his son," Roderich assumed, just as the St. Mark seemed to nod proudly, nuzzling into Feliciano's neck as he petted him. Incredible how a creature from the Aces could be so gentile, calm and playful, making Feliciano question if indeed he was the son of Augusta's own fierce one, but it just made sense with his power, welcome, and the particular moment he came into his life.

"Now…for the stars," Ivan wanted to start, a more serious intent on his tone as he pointed to the Verissimus chart that hanged above them once again.

Ah yes, the continuous stars that had appeared in the floors of all the palaces, a constant symbol around the relics of the cave…one that had even appeared in Feliciano's dream.

"What…what are they?" Feliciano could finally ask, looking intently to them, somehow trying to get it himself, but it just seemed too complicated, especially when he was just finding out about this.

"The stars symbolize a moment when the universe is at complete balance, in which everything under its creation is surged with new power. In a way, it's great for growth, for plentiful crops, weather, and more magical energy to arise in our air," Elizabeta started.

"But…it means that both Khaos and Pisa's power increases, an outburst that can release them from their human guise into our world. It's incredibly dangerous to those with a mind as dark as Keron's," Ivan warned.

"The hand itself had warned Augusta with visions about what was to come, of the great prosperity or great destruction that could befall our world once those stars aligned," Roderich continued. "So, with the calculations done by a Heartian astronomer, Severinus Verissimus, a day was pinpointed for when it would come and Augusta decided that she would live among the humans for that time to face Keron herself. She was reborn in the Italian province in Hearts, a province that she held dearly to for it was the first and she showed more of herself in it than any other. She was given to a farm family in Barga, who were honored at being chosen and bringing growth to a new kind of human Augusta."

Vases showed her rebirth, growing with this new family, doing things like farming, playing and meeting with Fabius, who couldn't leave her behind even as a human. It showed her large mind, always learning, always practicing her power and knowledge of combat, but also painting, sculpting and playing the harp that she still kept with her.

"Leaving the heavens to the human world meant that she had to leave behind the hand of creation…who started making quite some decisions on its own," Elizabeta told, which earned a worried glance from Feliciano, fearing the worst, but Elizabeta smiled to show him that it hadn't been anything dire. "The hand chose her as Queen of Hearts, quite a surprise to her after seeing the mark, after the processes she had to go through being just a supposed farm girl to those who didn't know in the kingdom. Now, being queen meant that she would have a king chosen for her by the hand, a quite particular one."

Ah yes, Feliciano's great grandfather, the acclaimed Romulus. He was wondering when he would come into the picture. What was his real side of the story? What parts did he play to the coming star alignment? And what was the truth of his relationship with the Ace of Hearts?

"As we all know, Romulus was a bastard and orphaned boy scavenging the streets of Rome, dirty and with nothing. Yet even with his circumstances, he was joyous, always accompanied with a boisterous laugh. He was also daring, brave, an air of nobility despite being from the streets. It was quite a shock for all to see that he was chosen as the next king, and so many had thought that he was unworthy of having the Ace's affections…but…" Ivan smiled, so did the rest, showing then a painting of the first time Romulus and Augusta had met, as mere children, forced to interact after their discovery as future rulers of the kingdom. Romulus seemed so shy and nervous, wanting instant hiding from those beautiful eyes that seemed to inspect him fully, while Augusta stood just as impressed, as curious, a call for more from this boy and what he could do as her future king.

"They instantly befriended each other, with intense care and devotion that went through any barriers their world could place against them. Even in their own eight years of separation as tradition, they remained with a small connection, a letter for each of their birthdays. Even apart their relationship grew, and when they finally met again to begin their arising, a new spark had grown, something new was between their feelings that were not for mere friends." Elizabeta alighted a new tapestry, of them meeting once again as adults, with a new kind of impression, eyes lost in new kinds of wants, a begging in the shake of their hands for something much closer.

"As their apprenticeship continued, as they learned and practiced together," Roderich pointed to an unfinished metal work for a gate that showed all their kind of training, readings and discovery of new kinds of power, magic and energy. "Augusta realized she was in love, and Romulus shared those very feelings for her, in great devotion, sacrifice, and unlike any kind of force that Augusta knew."

And so started a collection of paintings and murals dedicated to their love, showing their dances, their singing, Romulus granting her many gifts of flowers, of jewelry, poetry, even failed paintings that earned laughs from her. The romance between his great grandparents

was absolutely beautiful, making Feliciano dreamy, lost to the imagining of more adventures between them, based on tales he had heard from his very family.

“After her horrible first marriage to Keron, Augusta was honestly quite scared of the kind of chains a lying love could give her. Love had a bad image to her that she never wanted to repeat, never wanted to go through again, but Romulus made her consider all her words, made her crave that romance and that closeness to somebody that she could trust, a person she could truly be happy with and even consider a dear friend as well. So when Romulus came to her, singing the famed ‘If you accept to be mine’ as a proposal for marriage, she gladly accepted and thus for their crowning they were also married.”

One of the largest paintings in the cave presented their marriage under an altar, both dressed in regality, jewels and power, Augusta wearing such a dress that almost made Feliciano melt under the gleams of its beauty. The image centered in the wear of their rings and crowns, officiating their marriage and officiating their rule of the Hearts Kingdom, blessed ultimately with the presence of an Ace.

“We should also add that the first time Romulus sang her ‘Accept to be mine’, it was a complete disaster,” Elizabeta laughed.

“The words horribly rhymed, in his nervousness he forgot many of the verses, he broke a string of his own guitar and the writings say he even stopped half way, having given up to embarrassment,” Roderich added.

“Augusta laughed, picked her own harp and helped him continue the song, completing it how we now know it,” Ivan pointed to an old parchment paper resting on the hands of a statue of Romulus. As Feliciano got closer, he noticed that the old decaying thing was actually the original papers it was written on, the lyrics and melody clear, bringing Feliciano a temptation to sing it that instant.

“The writings say they sang it often, as whispers, as shouts that could be heard well throughout the castle halls, when they went out, when they practiced, a melody that the kingdom began to know and so it spread, and so the whole world knew of their dedicated romance…it even reached Keron.” Elizabeta pointed to another mural of his anger, full of vengeance and a need to kill as showed by his harsh grip on the throne he took, a looming danger with the stars slowly aligning unto the day. “Don’t be misled, Romulus and Augusta still kept their focus on the day those stars will aligned, they still strengthened, they still learned and Augusta received a great addition to her knowledge from her time living with humans.”

“On that year of the alignment though, Augusta birthed two sons, twins."

“Filippo and Cecilio,” Feliciano knew, constant names in their history and the telling of his family, after all Filippo was one of his great grandparents, the one who returned to Barga to begin and repair the plantation after the war, while Cecilio stayed to care for the castle…or so Feliciano knew and hoped was still the case.

“Exactly. It was the height of Romulus’s happiness. He had everything, it was all perfect…so he grew fearful of losing it all. Augusta, his sons, their love, their life…he was willing to do

anything to keep it like this, to continue to give them everything," Roderich grew a saddening tone that Feliciano was not liking at all. "So on the day they were supposed to leave to fight, to be ready to face Keron near the field…Romulus refused Augusta to come along in deep fears of losing her…so…he used power of the validity spheres to keep her, along with their twins, locked in the Heartian palace so she wouldn't come along and so she could stay safe."

"But…but…the whole point for her rebirthing as a human was to face Keron herself! Why would he do this?!" He was as shocked as surely his great grandmother would have been.

"Like I said, dreading the thought of losing her. He was determined to face Keron's wrath himself, thinking he was strong enough, not understanding the magnitude of what Keron was going to be granted." Roderich then showed a painting of Romulus with an army making his way, with proud armor, weapons, flags…just like any other painting that was outside the cave about his triumph in the war.

"He-he beat him at least, right? After all, he's the great hero of the war, that's the point of his stories, that's how he got known, that's how he's known to my family, how I know him…he-he had to…" Feliciano wanted to hope, wanted to think, shaking and even dreading the next words they were to say.

"Feliciano…this was before the war," Roderich wanted to ease.

"Nobody, not even Augusta, expected what was going to happen…" Ivan continued, then showing an old decaying fresco of a large, intimidating, vicious and dark…monster. It was like a towering shadow, enough to cover the smallness of a village under his feet, with sharp teeth, eyes, claws, symbols upon symbols of hunt that only shook Feliciano with more fear.

"Wha-what is that?" He backed away, scared to even continue looking at it.

"That's Keron's escape from his caged human guise, the form he was granted with the pulse of the universe, more than enough power to break his bonds of the field and unleash his anger, with plans to destroy completely the creation of the Aces in his revenge."

"It was an image of complete terror. The writings say that people died by merely watching him, and if not, they suffered under his power, under the war he had created in his shadow of killing, sucking the life and color of everything that was blessed by the hands of the Aces. It was utter chaos, which is how he got his new name," Elizabeta explained. "Romulus's army was not ready for this kind of immensity, many fell, only a handful survived to be able to take part in the writings, but with horrible damages that they suffered throughout the rest of their lives."

"But Romulus, what happened to Romulus?" Feliciano begged to know.

The three grew nervous to say, Elizabeta taking that breath, ready to be the one to let Feliciano know this other detail.

"The writings say he fought on bravely, never for a moment stopping the swing of his sword, the intensity of his fire, of his spells and magic, but…it wasn't enough…he died in the

confrontation," she declared, which brought a new surge of shock to Feliciano, bringing him a sudden weakening, a watering to his eyes, a hurt that seemed to still his heart.

"N-no, no…no he couldn't have, they always told us he died of old age, he…continued to live, in the richest he earned after his triumph in the war, no, no, no," he refused, the room spinning as tears welled more in his eyes.

"That's…what they wanted people to think…but it wasn't the actuality," Roderich told, looking over to a painting of Romulus's last approach to Khaos before he was succumbed into darkness, another mural showing how Khaos sucked his power, his life, a body to burn along with the disarray of others who suffered.

"Augusta had felt him disappear, she felt his light diminish and be gone from the face of the world, and that's when her great despair started."

Another painting, unfinished, showed her wallowing with an intense scream, kneeling before the floor, her face messed with tears and sorrow, her shadow seeming to be touched by Romulus's loss of blood from afar. The tears that verged on Feliciano's eyes fell, as if it he was retaking Augusta's very own suffering. No, no. As more images were shown, of the kind of destroy that her emotions and soul went through after losing her dearly beloved, Feliciano realized that he could only reach to feel half of it. No such misery could compare, no such pains could be reached. Feliciano saw as each statue, painting and mural did the very light disappear from Augusta, gone along with Romulus.

"The loss made her weak, a breaking that even affected her magic and power, a pure misery that continued to reign within her…for thirty years."

The next images were those of the true disaster of the known war of the blackened decades, but the blood, the ruin, the burning, unlike anything Feliciano had thought this war had brought. It was an agony, an obliterating that ripped apart into nothingness the world he know of beauty, prosperity and life. It only worsened his tears, his disarray, covering his face as if he could feel the stench of death looming high.

He always thought it had been mere battles, a force that should have been easy for his great grandfather Romulus to defeat…not this monster, not this utter bring into debris, of darkened lands left behind in poison and smoke, rivers and lakes drained, colors disappeared and nothing strong enough to stand against the now monstrous Keron.

"What about the other Aces? What about the angels? What about Pisa? Didn't she get an outburst because of the alignment too?"

"None of the other Aces could do a thing, they sent as many aids to the human world, even angels that helped in backing, for many to survive longer, to hold out and even create distractions, but they weren't enough, it wasn't his unreachable potent."

"Pisa was indeed granted her own power and a battle surged between them trying to subdue the other, but in one miss, in one failed attempt by Pisa, she was done for. She died, her kingdom perished completely without repair alongside her as we normally know."

A mural showed that fight, Keron's large dark monstrous shadow, while Pisa was a large angelic white, but the darkness took control of it, she was extinguished under him, a shriek, terror in her face that made Feliciano almost hear it as he passed hurriedly by it.

"And…Augusta?"

"She was consumed by her sadness and for a great length of the war all she did was remain in the castle, too weakened by her emotions, sending men after men, witches, wizards, angels, even all kinds of creatures to try and stop him, but none returned well, and year by year, the chance for an arising against him seemed much more bleak. Many had succumbed to knowing that their world was coming to an end and even Augusta was firm about it, waiting for the day that Khaos would finally extinguish everything until reaching Rome where she sat, his final goal."

"He was willing to give her an offer though…the return of the hand of creation, marriage once again to him, and by his side in the ruling of his new world, but Augusta decided she rather perish than live so unhappily and betray Romulus even in his death, even with the years that passed of her watching the world she had helped create break more day by day."

Feliciano was getting agitated, reaching a hand to a tapestry of her as if he could help console her, awaiting by her throne for Khaos's soon reach to kill her.

"But even though Augusta seemed like she was ready to give up, there were many others who still hoped." Elizabeta then pointed to ancient flags, showing the forms of seven figures, surely key. "The Queens of the time, Queen Adrian of Clubs, Queen Ailen of Spades, Queen Sabah of Diamonds, her two grown sons, Prince Filippo and Prince Cecilio, and…her very jack."

"Soren Sylvaster," Feliciano knew, he was just as mentioned in the stories.

"Actually…his real name was Soren Beilschmidt."

Feliciano's steps halted, turned to them with widened eyes, filled with both intrigue and question.

"Beilschmidt?" Feliciano wanted to be sure.

"Indeed," Roderich smiled, clearly proud of that part of his own heritage.

"Like Beilschmidt, Beilschmidt?"

"Yes! He's Ludwig's own ancestor," Elizabeta added.

"The…jack of hearts?" It was surprising, he didn't think his family had that connection to the Beilschmidts for so long. As he gazed to a tapestry showing Soren's appearance, he noticed his strength and stature, bald but with a prominent blond beard. Feliciano could take hints to the same facial structures that most Beilschmidts held. Give him slicked back blond hair, shave that beard and one could see Ludwig.

"Yes, and just as loyal to her as Romulus had been."

“Augusta cared for him dearly, like a good friend, sometimes even a brother. We suspect that it was because of that relationship that she granted his linage to hold the kingship of the kingdom.”

“Along with the other queen’s perseverance and her own two sons, they tried to convince her to fight, after all, it was her duty, the reason for her rebirth. They had to regain her once liveliness so her magic could rise, a magic they believed would be enough.”

“And did it work?” Feliciano began to hope as they had.

“At first, no, a sickening that none of her two boys could stand any longer, so…they decided to go to the war themselves and face Keron. After all, they were sons of an Ace, they were confident.”

“And they really did?”

“Actually, no. Augusta couldn’t take watching her boys leave to something so drastic alone, lose them as she had her husband, so finally…she went along.”

“With the Queens, with Soren, and with an army of soldiers they had gathered from Rome, Augusta led people to reclaim the burned lands that Khaos had taken, defeating those of Khaos’s men that remained, restoring back its color, its liveliness, giving back its control to its mayors, governors, people coming back to refresh, to build, to have their crops grow and try to live on, knowing that Augusta was fighting, traveling the lands, saving provinces after provinces.” Elizabeta then showed many countless of paintings with Augusta’s trajectory, her harp bow firing, on the back of her St. Mark, Fabius, with a cry for a war, a war to defend this time, Feliciano watching with each painting as her power strengthened in each battle, a return to her force as an Ace that many had seemed to forgotten. Always by her side fighting was Soren, along with the other Kings, Queens, Jacks, her sons, and a trail of soldiers of different kingdoms and provinces offering themselves to fight for their world, all until their final meeting with Khaos.

“She continued on fury, in her own vengeance, bloodthirsty, violent, a fierceness that no one had known she could turn into. She wouldn’t take proper rest until Khaos was defeated, for putting her world at risk, her loved ones, her Romulus, and it only helped to make her stronger, for her power to grow.” Ivan pointed to a large statue of her, dirtied, cut and ripped from the damages of war, yet her face and stature was still as determined, intent in the way she held her harp, even a sword at her other side.

“They had driven Khaos back, away from his goal to face Augusta in Rome, until he had no other choice than to stand for himself right before the field she had imprisoned him long ago.”

A tapestry showed that commence, that preparation, Augusta dressed in her own specific armor, harp at her side, ready to move forward to the large monstrous thing alone.

“The battle had been massive. The writings say it took various hours for a clear result, a large part of the field destroyed in the process, as well as many of Augusta’s men and women falling.”

Murals and tapestries showed that encounter, Augusta's figure a shining sun light breaking apart Khaos's darkness, sun arrows piercing well, a feral look in her eyes wanting nothing but to completely succumb him.

"For many it was a fest, for Augusta used skill upon skill to weaken him, trying new things that surged at the moment that nobody had thought possible. They watched as some had failed, as Khaos would hit back, but Augusta would strike harder, on and on, until finally-"

"She defeated him!" Feliciano excited.

"In a way, yes." There was doubt in Roderich's tone though. "She had weakened him enough to remove his powers, with it creating a new field to imprison him, returning him once again to his human guise and officially putting his rampage to an end."

From there on the images were those of triumphs, of Augusta ruling at the post of a battlefield, proud, countless around her celebrating, but despite this relief, the grandeur…she still seemed sad. She didn't shout, she didn't jump or sing with the rest, if anything she even seemed scared.

"She was…the real hero of the war…wasn't she?" Feliciano realized as he let his hand trace one of the images.

"Yes, she was," Elizabeta assured.

"Why doesn't…why doesn't anyone acknowledge this then? Why was her meaning…erased like this?" Feliciano still wondered, broken that such an important story, one of their history, of themselves, wasn't better known, instead buried in this cave and continued in the world above in silence for several centuries.

"That's what were…about to get into," Elizabeta began to introduce, meeting with a large painting showing Augusta in her Ace form, supreme, glowing and powerful. "You see, Augusta hoped…that Khaos hadn't truly killed Romulus, but taken his spirit and soul since it did hold some energy because of the union of his power with Augusta, something to aid him, something to help bring more ruin to the world. She thought if she defeated him, then he would be released, but…"

"It didn't happen. Romulus remained lost in an uncertain plain that she couldn't reach, not into the cycle of acceptance into their heaven. She was never going to receive a meeting with him, so one of the reasons she couldn't celebrate was because she didn't earn her Romulus as part of her had hoped."

"So…she began to heavily honor him. She prayed, she continued to mourn, had songs, stories, paintings, murals, even temples made for him, as a way to make his memory alive, hoping…hoping it would be enough to return something to her. The more it didn't work, the more she tried to hide her own importance in the war if it meant it could be given to Romulus, for enough worshiping energy. When her time as a human ended, she begged to not have many symbols of her, to focus on Romulus, to dedicate all the stories to him, which is why we always thought that Romulus was the true hero of the war, a story we took to truth and history."

“Even after she died, many continued to make murals and portraits, against her wishes, so King Iolanda, three generations afterwards, had decree this cave be made to hide everything that existed.”

“Willing to just erase our history?” Feliciano was rather insulted.

“It was Augusta’s very wish,” Roderich defended.

“As well to keep people from panicking over Augusta’s very last words,” Ivan continued, halting them all to a moment of opportune.

“Her last words? She couldn’t have just died, she’s an Ace. With her end in the human world, shouldn’t she just have returned to the heavens?” Feliciano assumed, hoping and even sure that it had been the case.

“Well…” Elizabeta tried to word in her nervousness, gazing over to the others hoping for some inspiration on how exactly they should tell him this next part. “First of all, Feliciano… that star alignment… wasn’t the last one…”

Feliciano found meaning enough to fear, for a shiver to paint over him. “Wha-what?”

“It’s a common natural phenomenon in the universe that repeats every so thousand years. Augusta was clear about that, she knew that Khaos’s form would return for the next one. After all, she did defeat him, putting him back in the field along with his human guise, but she didn’t kill him…and he’s well enough to receive the same surge once again, to create havoc as he had done.”

Feliciano’s mind flashed with the images of monstrosity, shaking him to whimpers, wrapping his arms around himself to try and block from more continuing in his thoughts.

“She knew, that many more years from her own, that she would have to face him yet again, with stronger power, fierceness and intent on truly ending him. But she knew she wouldn’t be strong enough, and no matter how much she would practice for those next thousands of years, it wouldn’t be enough, it will end with the same results or with her own death.”

“She needed more power, energy, magic, and so she formulated a plan to get it.”

Yet another mosaic of Augusta holding the light, with ever imperial stature, yet this time, under her, was the image of a new baby…receiving all her power.

“The reason why Pisa and Khaos received that surge was because they were creations of the universe, unlike her who was a creation of Pisa and Khaos. But in her holding, she had the hand of creation, which we know was also an item of the universe. She knew that she needed that very surge from the universe to beat Khaos, and her ultimate help would be the very hand of creation, becoming one with it, turning completely into its person until she herself could count as a creation to the universe.”

“Why didn’t she think about it earlier?” Feliciano questioned.

The rest shrugged, “she didn’t think dealing with Khaos would be so disastrous, and it was only after the results that the very hand suggested this idea and that she had the information and skill to do it.”

“But turning into the hand of creation wouldn’t be enough either, she knew certain time was needed, she knew a certain creation had to take place, one she couldn’t do…one that could only be possible in the continuation of her lineage in our world.”

And this is where the three gazed to Feliciano, as if he was the painting, mural, tapestry or mosaic that would explain enough to the story now…that baby that constantly appeared.

“Before she died, she warned that a new alignment would come, she warned that Khaos would rampage again, this time with more ferocity. All who had been around her had hoped that she would just rebirth to face him yet again, but she told them instead that a great grandson would.”

Feliciano was weary about what they were going to continue saying.

“She told them that instead of returning to the heavens, she would transfer herself, her power, her magic, into her own linage, one that would start with the birth of her granddaughter, Sebastiana.”

“Wait, I’m confused, did she …actually die or is alive through our lineage?”

“In a way, both,” Ivan answered to Feliciano’s uneasiness, but his answer made him remain with the same question in his eyes and expression.

“She ceased to be able to send herself and the very hand of creation she became to regain more energy from her family members as they would remain in this world with essence of the universe, being sent and added through the creation of birth in our world, from child to child to child.”

The clarity was seen more in Feliciano’s face, but there was a sudden worry that was nearing. He knew something was coming.

“She warned that there wouldn’t be any more Italian queens after her…and she prophesized that a thousands year from her time, twenty years before the next alignment is to come…a new Italian queen will be chosen from her line, who will be born in Barga as she had once done, to live within the one with the highest of the Valenti lineage power, the one that will receive the surge of the universe along with Khaos…to face him and stop him once and for all and then take their place as the new Ace of Hearts and even the hand of creation…”

Feliciano shook, he trembled, fearing that his whole body would soon hit ground, to unconsciousness that seemed more comforting.

“And that is you, Feliciano.”

He fell and had been lucky that Roderich and Ivan were there to catch him, to stand him, placing balancing arms on his back to keep him from wobbling more, the torches close to

keep his eyes awake. They really regretted not bringing any food or water, for he paled and grew ever the lighter, on a brink to wanting to let himself be spirited away from the sudden meaning and responsibility that was held in himself.

“A-Ace-Ace of Hearts? Ha-hand of creation? I-I have to-have to…face Khaos in the next alignment?” His breath worsened, slumping and sweating as if he had run miles around the cave.

“Yes, you are the strongest in your lineage as you have proven enough, with Augusta residing within you, having granted you this power and position,” Elizabeta told.

“With enough training, we believe you can manage to defeat Khaos,” Roderich seemed sure and Feliciano was surer about hitting the ground soon as another tiring wave went through his head. They had to force him into a sitting, Roderich taking out a fan to flap at his face trying to give him enough air.

“Kha-Khaos, I have to-I have to…face Khaos like…that!” He pointed to another tapestry showing another depiction of the monstrous form he took the last alignment. It made Feliciano tremble the more, the rest having to focus his eyes away from it.

“You have the power within you to do it!” Elizabeta believed.

“Augusta as well within you to aid,” Ivan tried to help, even placing a soothing hand on his shoulder.

“She could have begun to aid me long ago! She could have told me! Yet never a thing! Always leaving me with questions and silence, and when I finally get answers, all of a sudden I have to deal with saving our world, becoming a god and even a powerful item of the universe, just like that!” He angered, trembling into tears, Elizabeta sitting with him to shush and rub her hands over his arms and back.

“Maybe…it isn’t the proper time, maybe Augusta is waiting to properly contact you,” Elizabeta tried to make him realize.

“And this isn’t a proper time?” He whimpered, neared to a shout. “Don’t I need proper training and teaching? How can I get it when there’s no one else in the world with this kind of power and there’s no writings about it!” He frustrated, yet again Elizabeta seeing Feliciano in responses that didn’t fit him, rare and saddening, just making her wish that she had all the answers to give him in this matter. “A god? A god! She wants me to become a god! Does she expect me to leave behind my world like that? To just…know everything to face and kill someone with that much dark power.” He extended his arms, opening his hands as if he could see all that magic, confusing and loaded with ultimate creation and not a clue on what to do than what he was taught with books and teachers. It pained him to know that none of that would be enough, that he’d had to find a way by himself, and how could he? How could he deal with his queenly duties as well? All those people…all those creatures…all their world…its protection, its future, in his hands, heavy and prominent, and Ludwig…Ludwig…Ludwig…he crashed into tears yet again, all breaking and making it seem like his whole body was sobbing.

There were no more words they could give, only silence, Elizabeta leaning to give him an embrace, Ivan and Roderich continuing with their pats, as long as Feliciano needed to break from this.

“When…when?” He suddenly asked in his tremors, not yet daring to show his worsened tear stained face.

“When what?” Elizabeta questioned.

“When is the next alignment?” He practically whispered, surely scared.

They all sighed knowing that it would add to the heaviness of the duty, but it was important, pointing over to the Verissimus chart over them, the calendar stretching out to show two of these star alignments. The first they knew had passed, clear with its year and even time, then there was the next one, calculated and established, a sure one that Feliciano knew would remain marked in his head until that day.

“…a year from now,” Roderich realized, even the fear reaching him.

“Shortly after your twentieth birthday as Augusta said,” Ivan added, which only worsened Feliciano’s state, so sick and even deadly that Elizabeta couldn’t deal with it any longer.

“I’m sure the writings have something about proper training. We’ll properly search and hand you anything we deem might be helpful. But it’s a year from now, and right now you should be focused on placing the Validity Spheres tomorrow, it assures us that year to prepare, strengthening the field and perhaps even weaken Khaos when he breaks out.”

“Your orb must be the strongest one there has been for centuries, it would probably even give us more hours before Khaos breaks out,” Roderich added.

“Gives us good enough time to ready our armies,” Ivan already trusted.

“Armies?”

“Of course,” Ivan assured.

“We’ll begin preparations as soon as you head back to Berlin."

“Well…that is…if you accept that the news should be diverged,” Roderich reminded.

“…I can decide if I want this to be known or not?”

“The writings did say that afterwards the cave is yours to do as you please, but to be wary on how people would react.”

Feliciano remained silent as he gave it thought, a serious dedication that Roderich couldn’t help but feel proud about, knowing that he was thinking logically and thoroughly. He had grown, a certain maturity in his mind had been reached that was thinking well of the outcomes and implications as a queen should.

“I believe…it should be told, but gently and slowly, it’s not something that most can easily learn to accept and adapt, but I don’t believe only Clubs should remain with that burden, the rest of the kingdoms would have to…prepare for a war.” Of course he was scared of the word, of its heaviness and surely coming threats, but the more they were prepared for it, the more casualties can be avoided. “I’ll…call for a meeting to tell my castle and then write messages to the rest of the kingdoms and provinces. They’ll ready what they can… we have a year. I’ll…search for readings and do what I can to learn about my power.” He was shy, rubbing his hands unsure if it was enough, if it could work, if the rest of the kingdoms can accept the contents of this cave to be open, without the panic that their ancestors had worried about.

“But…we shouldn’t fret for now. It’s a matter to focus once you return from the field. I know it’s hard but…we really have to try and get some sleep now. We have to create the Validity Spheres, you have to leave, head to the field and finally back home,” Elizabeta smiled as she caressed the side of Feliciano’s face, a suggestion she shared to her two other companions, who nodded and agreed that it was best for now to head to their rooms.

“Come along, if you ever need to come back here just ask any of us, we all know the spell of entrance from the hall,” Ivan offered, his torch leading them out, back until they found the stairs, a high climb that made Feliciano internally groan. Roderich went first, then Elizabeta, then Feliciano, leaving Ivan behind to stand alone, looking among the many relics in the cave…but not giving any other step to continue upward with them.

“There’s…something else we forgot to mention,” Ivan reminded, his gaze now strongly on an image of Romulus, young, vivacious and headstrong.

The rest stopped in their own step, looking back, attentive, although Feliciano groaned once again. What more was there to say? Hadn’t this all been enough to stress him and probably keep him awake at night?

“There’s…a letter.”

Elizabeta and Roderich’s eyes widened in realization, not believing that they had almost forgotten.

“What letter?” Feliciano immediately broke the silence.

“In the chest with all the writings, there was a letter addressed to Ludwig.”

“To Ludwig?”

“Well…not specifically Ludwig, the front said that it was meant for whoever would be king to you.”

“What’s in it?”

“We don’t know,” Roderich said.

“Huh?”

“We weren’t allowed to, our only duty was to send it to him before his eighteenth birthday.”

“But-but…why? If it was in the chess of writings the surely it has to do with Augusta, so shouldn’t you all be allowed to?”

“The thing is Feliciano…the letter was written by Romulus.”

Just when he thought things would be clear. Now another question reigned on his head, another worry, another persisting, wondering, connecting and trying to guess its contents and how it had to with Augusta and her plans if it meant that it was addressed to Ludwig. But… something didn’t make sense…why would Romulus send a letter to Ludwig when he died before he knew about what Augusta decided with their lineage? What could he have possibly written to a future king? Was it what…Ludwig was trying to hide from him? The reason for his acting and change? Finally a point, finally a nearing, maybe- his head hurt, there was a pang, he was tired, he was close to taking rest in that very step if it meant immediate sleep.

“Let’s just…head back for now. In the morning we’ll deal with the troubles that are at hand. Feliciano, really focus on resting, all will be revealed at its time,” were her last words before she urged them all to continue upward, even Feliciano who had a reluctance and seemed to stab each step with his worry, anxiousness and fears.

Chapter 47

Chapter Notes

> Yet another long chapter, but not as long as the last two, but still long. I believe this to be a rather important chapter and I hope it is the same for you. I really hope you enjoy!

They honestly thought he could find some rest, that his eyes wouldn't remain awake for minutes on end, that every sleep wouldn't have a different nightmare, a different duty, an awaiting that only brought more stress in Feliciano's dreams. When the trumpets sounded for their awakening, Feliciano was groggy, strained in every movement in his preparation. Any tiredness was washed away with soaps and creams, Feliciano having to relax his thoughts in the pettings he gave to Pookie and the details to his new wear. It was custom to wear these white suits, tightening, with all kinds of seals but miniscule designs of silver and gold that flourished beautifully. It had once been clothing cultural to the White kingdom, as so, in honor for its loss and Pisa's own, the Heart royals wore these when receiving the last of the validity spheres and in their final route to place them all in the awaiting field…which now Feliciano knew had stood for longer, created by the Aces, a defeat by Augusta, a defeat he would have to do himself.

Another strain, another hurt, after he told himself he wouldn't dare keep his thoughts so prominent in that reveal from last night.

There was a knock at the door, along with a: "It's time, your highness." A servant surely, with others ready to take out his luggage which he had already prepared in a corner to leave. He exited the room, smiling, complimenting and thanking them for their own compliments to himself, trying to show some excitement, some order and confidence as he was led through the halls of the castle. Soon enough the doors to the throne room were before him and with a nod from the guards it was opened, only him allowed entrance, the doors falling immediately shut after.

Ivan, Elizabeta and Roderich were already there, dressed in white as expected, tired eyes, but with enough to wave and greet into their presence. Feliciano neared and honestly wanted a hug, but he knew in the situation it would be rather inappropriate.

"How are you feeling now?" Elizabeta asked, at least offering a comforting hand to his arm.

Feliciano could only sigh, with it trying to pull out more strength, to instead let his smile shine. "Be-better." That smile worked well, Elizabeta confiding in it for now.

Any other words that wanted to be said were interrupted by the loud echo of the doors opening, in coming the last member they needed, in his own white suit, primed, shinning and

ready, making his way towards them nonchalantly, quiet, the only offered greeting but a bow that the rest answered to in reciprocation.

“Shall we begin then?” Elizabeta introduced, pointing to the empty orbs standing behind them in a chest.

All agreed, the three Club royals taking their own blank sphere, settling into an organized position over the floors of the room. Feliciano gazed to the marble, and once again, the images of the stars, the reminder, the coming, Feliciano reaching the understanding that perhaps these floors remained in the throne rooms as a warning to the Kings, Queens and Jacks, a silent one that no one bothered to analyze or find for themselves for centuries.

He groaned to himself, scolding for letting his mind once again traverse through this, raising his eyes and settling them on…Ludwig. He stood tall, the only movement given to him being the slow breathing he took, almost unaware, attentive to his duty as per usual. Feliciano’s gaze was longing, it remained and with the corner of Ludwig’s eyes he had captured that bronze stare.

“What?” He demanded, angry and intimidating.

Feliciano quickly turned away, “nothing.”

Ludwig didn’t give it more thought and let his gaze remain on the procedures that were to take place, but Feliciano’s mind couldn’t remain with that same stillness as Ludwig had taken.

The images of those relics repeated, Feliciano reminded of how Ludwig’s own ancestor was a Jack and fought alongside his own, he thought of Romulus, of his death wanting to protect his love, of the letter…the letter…he gazed to Ludwig once again as if he could read it before him, but it only earned him another glare from the blond, a command to pay attention instead to what was occurring. They were to begin.

Roderich decided on going first, all graceful air even in his preparation, determined to not come out as unfazed as he had read. He extended, he silenced, he let himself alight in the usual glow, in the float, in the pouring and in the feeling. He stumbled, but quickly got his composure, riding of the sweat that began to fall, standing as if it wasn’t there, as if his lips weren’t trembling and his eyes hadn’t watered. His orb shone in an ivy green color, with a glitter and hue of white, a beauty that surely made Roderich proud.

Ivan raised a hand declaring his turn, both Elizabeta and Roderich nodded, giving him the space to extend, for him to breathe and find his control. The glow, the rise, the filling, and once done, he actually took the most graceful drop down, seeming unperturbed, if only but a slight strain shown in the way he shook his head. Roderich grew rather jealous, but the second orb was done so that was the only thing that mattered. It was in the kingdom’s royal green with streaks of silver mixed, some larger, some thinner, but a shining beauty none the less.

And finally it was Elizabeta’s turn, who stood between them, still dealing with her breathing, if slightly nervous, finding the correct calm, the correct fall to her power that called her

release, until finally she had her own glow, her own levitation and the filling of the orb started. Around and around her hold until she landed once again on the floor, close to tripping backward if Roderich hadn't caught her just in time. Ivan offered his hand for her to come into balance, a massive headache still reigning in her head that made her groan, trying to rub it off away as she presented her orb. A green color, slightly lighter than the royal one, with sharp edges of white with green dots between, peculiar and making her orb stand out differently.

They were all done, the last orbs, ready to be taken and the three just seemed anxious to have them off their hands already.

It was Ludwig's turn for movement as he presented the staff, evoking the right spell in his mind, and finally, all the sockets in the orb alighted, completed and sure, an item with finality that was ready.

"And you are done," Elizabeta congratulated happily.

"It won't be official until the orbs are placed in the field," Roderich commented.

"Come now, we must set off immediately!" Ivan ushered them forward, not a chance to speak or halt, between rushing servants all leading to the exit where once again they were welcomed with the same horses of their arrival. More guards than the last time were positioned around, many holding to the three royal horses waiting patiently for their assigned riders.

Ivan, Ludwig and Feliciano were not permitted to show any hesitation in reaching their horses, in preparing them, mounting and awaiting any signal for their begin. Shouts were exchanged in Russian as Ivan called out different commands, most preparing hoods over their heads for the clouding skies.

How somber, Feliciano realized, but also fitting and giving a fright to what was coming. He tried to sink down any thoughts about what the weather must have been like for when Khaos and Augusta fought, or when other royals came to place the spheres.

Rain began to sparkle down and it was enough of a declare for all the men to begin their movement. Only Ivan joined them, Roderich and Elizabeta wishing farewells from the entrance, continuing in their waves until the large group of men continued forward, through the soaking streets, civilians taking peek from their windows, shouting good byes and luck and Feliciano answered to them back in the same intent, really hoping all these words and blessings could work them well in not only the placing in the field, but in all the rest that he knew he would need it for.

No matter what was going on, Feliciano's head now continuously had the haunting of the preparations to face Khaos, the monstrous form still shown before him, even if down in the cave, even if months from now, even if he wasn't to meet him yet…but he would be close, to the field of antiquity, to the field where his great grandfather fell and his great grandmother came out victorious.

They passed over the bridge, a landmark that pointed one to its sure direction, forward and coming, no turning back, their duty was coming and the finalization was approaching.

After a whole day of traveling, they arrived that late afternoon at a village named Tiksi. It was small, with only a handful of inhabitants that were mostly guards with their daring families. It was the closest village to the field, entrapped well between trees and few drops of snow to try and make it unnoticeable to any Khaos's men that was recently released. Many feared coming here because of its closeness to the field, especially when there was an eerie darkness with the untouched plentitude of the forest that left the routes deeper into the woods fearsome. Even the guards were terrified of going more than the established limits, their only mission being to stop any Khaos's men they caught or send messages to the Clubian royals for if an emergency occurred. The only ones allowed to go southern than it was permitted were the King and Queen of Hearts every so fifty years for the placing.

It was an honor for the inhabitants, who all came out to greet this arising King and Queen, with an enormous hospitality that tempted Feliciano to stay longer. They had such amazing stories about tracking down members of Khaos, of their tactics if some reached the village or if an emergency occurred. Some held relics from when past King and Queens had come, and some even told about their experiences of back when Aldrich and Louis had come themselves.

"-this, we believe was a bracelet that belonged to your great grandfather, Romulus," a woman presented Feliciano with a brazen ancient bracelet, the image of a lion on its front, covered then with red stones and a repetitive Hearts symbol. As Feliciano inspected it, the women began talking about all the great stories they had heard about Romulus, of how they admired him, his feats, his triumphs…all that Feliciano knew now truly belonged to Augusta, yet he smiled on, he was still compliant to the stories because they just didn't know. It was a headache that should be for himself and so he nodded, letting his hands trace around the bracelet, as if trying to find the ancient warmth of his great grandfather…if it was even his in the first place.

Suddenly there was a tremor, almost like thunder, skies slightly alighting in green and white before it instantly came down. There was silence as they all gazed forward to the depths of the forest, but just like that, the regular inhabitants went back to business, but some guards were sent forward to the near forest, while only the newcomers stared on in confusion.

"What was that?" Feliciano asked, interrupting whatever they were talking about.

"It was the field," one began to explain.

"It can be many things. Since the last Validity Spheres are slowly losing its power, it creates this sort of ripple throughout as it weakens. Sometimes Khaos uses it and tries to escape, but they always have some juice enough to hold him back during this time. But, some of Khaos's men do manage to pass through."

"Which is why those guards headed out?"

“Exactly, to see if they could catch them before they go any further. Sometimes it fails, but sometimes they get a few.”

“Other times it ripples when Khaos is testing something new to get out. A big explosion was once documented, but nothing occurred to break it luckily.”

Nothing could happen now and so the people continued on with their activities, the children playing, others talking on lively with laughter.

Yes, nothing could happen now…but in a year…

He dared gaze forward to the darkness of the forest of night, through where he and Ludwig would pass through in the morning, imagining the disasters that raged through here in the past…and would do so in the future. He quickly wrote in his sketchbook a reminder to have these people evacuated a couple of months before…he wouldn’t let this light disappear under Khaos’s darkness.

Another light, another thundering, another silence and even the children stopped playing as they gazed on to the skies in fear.

“Your highness, I think it’s best you and the prince settle off to sleep now,” one woman suggested.

“When it constantly happens like this, it means the field is weakening,” another pointed.

“The new ones have to be placed tomorrow, it’s in dire need of them,” one actually worried, showcasing the inner fear that most people in this village tried to hide.

He followed that command and went to his assigned cabin for the night. It was large enough to let Ludwig and Feliciano have separate rooms, both so distant that Feliciano could barely feel his presence, like the cabin was empty, with no extra breaths or steps to give it more life.

When he fell against the bed, he didn’t find immediate rest as he had hoped, he was still nervous and anxious, eyes awake, an occasional grip to his sheets as images were made in his head of the danger he was getting so close to. The added thunder and occasional glowing lights of the sky added more to his disarray, the only comfort being Pookie’s nuzzle, enough of a distraction to make him forget, to let him slowly fall into dream trying to forget the haunts.

What awoke him the next morning was the hurried pacing and loud speaking of the villagers and guards, already preparing for their departure. He only received a gentle knock at the door from Ludwig. Feliciano answered and Ludwig’s steps were gone outside to wait.

They were dressed once again in the same whites from yesterday, and although the soft and rich fabric, it was thin enough to make Feliciano shiver as he headed outside into the new fresh coldness of the day, a new batch of snow falling, greying the skies and tainting more the surroundings in white. A guard offered him a black cloak, heavy and bringing just the right

warmth to be able to move forward to where a group of villagers reunited along with Ivan, Ludwig already standing with his assigned horse, Feliciano's waiting…it was time.

All helped what they could in mounting, in placing their bags and making sure they were secured enough.

"These horses can only accompany you till the limit, it's marked with Heartian Chrysanthemums. From there you must both walk alone. Different marks will lead you forward until you reach a large white empty field, circle around it until you find an old pedestal, upon your touch it should increase and open for the placing. You must take the old ones with you to return in Rome, and once done, you shall come back to Tiksi to assure us all of your safe arrival. We shall then organize your trip back to Berlin and send messages with your wellbeing and completion," Ivan told, confident, clear and sure, not letting go of their reins until he could see the understanding in their eyes.

They both nodded, gazing then to the hazed road just for them, deeper into these dark forbidden woods, even with daylight.

"Come on," Ludwig began, settling his horse to move forward, a slow pace that Feliciano could follow, the smaller waving to the village and the very village waving back in luck.

The further they went, the more they turned into darkness, to match with the enclosure around them, leaving them in pure loneliness, into a precipice that couldn't grant another hand, another help.

This was it, it was almost before them and Feliciano made sure to keep his breaths easy, repeating to himself that nothing was going to go wrong, that soon enough they would be returning to plan their way home.

Yes, home, soon he would be back in Italy before settling to Berlin.

It was just this, just this.

They continued on their galloping for a while, passing much of the same trees and brooks, quite repetitive. They surely would have gotten lost if it hadn't been marked properly with constant clues.

The cold got more intense, and no matter how much Feliciano brought the cloak tighter around him and Pookie, it didn't stop his breath from misting, his shivering and slumping against the horse trying to receive any warmth he could.

Finally, they spotted the lines of red chrysanthemums and Ludwig halted them, the horses obedient, their hooves and whining the only sound for miles. There was not a fall, a river, not a cricket, the flap of a bird, or dragon, or phoenix to join in a melody, even just Ludwig and Feliciano's step as they dismounted echoed heavily, a new kind of shivering reaching Feliciano that had nothing to do with the cold.

The trees here began to sparse, the snow quite blinding and making them think that a mist was growing, trying to elude and halt them. It made Feliciano more hesitant to continue, but

Ludwig somehow had something in him that made him more daring, piercing the very distance with his eyes without a care.

“Come,” he only said, ushering Feliciano to move forward, only one bag over his shoulder, patient enough to wait, to get his movements, letting them stand close together as they now ventured forward on foot.

It was more solemn, a silence that only brought more agitation, well at least to Feliciano. From what he could see, Ludwig’s tall back was as fierce and strong as if this was simply a windy meadow, unfazed and brave. It was honestly how he would have preferred to be at that moment, without poison in his mind, hunted enough already by what he found two nights ago.

At some point, their steps weren’t enough, it only helped grow his anxiety, reminding that each movement was bringing them closer, and he determined to bring something of sound, something of an opening from Ludwig.

As he gazed forward to him…he couldn’t believe he still hoped…he still desired…and then that letter…that letter. Perhaps if he…

“So um…” he tried to start, testing out.

Ludwig walked on like nothing.

“I uh…I know who Augusta is now,” he admitted first, shyly and nervous, while Ludwig only gave him a simple glance before continuing forward.

He had thought that would work, especially after long ago it was Ludwig who placed that curiosity for his great grandmother in him.

“Mhm?” Was all Ludwig managed to response.

“She was um…the one who really defeated Khaos, as well as being the Ace of Hearts, which means, my whole family is a line of demi-gods, and I um…I am too, and-and in a way, do-don’t you think it-it’s kind of cool?” He tried to smile and chuckle, but it earned him a glare.

“It’s not,” Ludwig quickly admitted, turning and Feliciano just slumped once again in defeat, with a new heart ache that weigh harshly on him to the point that he swore his bones were hurting.

Give up, he told himself, just give up and don’t you dare cry now of all moments, just hold tighter to your cloak and try to forget about any words, nothing is going to work.

Silence continued yet again and neither tried a thing against it.

Trees continued to diminish, whiteness rising, growing and growing, and for a moment, Feliciano thought they were entering a mist, until he was released from the ceiling of trees and upwards was the grey sky and forward a large, large, large radius of only white snow seeming to extend infinitely.

It was odd, how trees continued behind them in a semi-circle and forward it was like everything had been wiped in a clean swoosh. As Feliciano focused his eyes the better, between a surely blowing blizzard deep into its center, there were mountains, tall snow covered top ones that hid in-between where surely…Khaos lied.

“Is this…the field?” Feliciano asked.

Ludwig offered to extend his hand, taking testing steps forward until his palm came across an invisible wall, a push that made it slightly ripple in distinct colors before settling back in transparency.

“It is.” Ludwig gazed upward, having read that the field rose up into a center like a very orb, of course reaching a good portion of the sky and surely even underneath the ground. It was odd and intimidating, and with the silence, the cold, the extending white and the loneliness, there was a cringe that made them feel small, defenseless and vulnerable.

“Let’s find the pedestal,” Ludwig commanded, beginning to walk its encirclement, both keeping their eyes out for anything that stood out from the snow.

For minutes on it was only the whiteness, the piling snow, the trees still standing with a dark mocking behind them, the cold seeming to intensify and actually making Feliciano use a warming spell because tightening his cloak just didn’t seem to give the same results as earlier. As he stopped to do this, in the corner of his eyes he caught a similar glow, an item picking up from his arising magic.

“Ludwig…” he called, spotting something of stone between the snow.

While he reached back, Feliciano kneeled and began moving the ice away, revealing slowly the pedestal they were looking for, sure when on it were presented ancient symbols of all the kingdoms. Ludwig helped to remove whatever snow was left until it was completely out in the air.

It was a stone rather simple, with no other inscriptions or form, nothing else to give them a clue.

“How does it open?” Feliciano wondered as he looked around it, gazing up to Ludwig expecting him to have already found it, but Ludwig wasn’t even looking at the pedestal, his gaze was strictly set forward on the distance, on the inners of the field, in his own concentration, without having heard Feliciano.

“Ludwig!” He called again, earning his perk and interest, gaze back on the pedestal in continuing question. What was it that his grandfather said? He kept going through the things he told him until he reached a particular memory.

“Spread your hands over all of them, it should accept any of our magic.”

And so Feliciano nodded and accepted, carefully letting his hand create that very trace, sure over all of them, with each passing letting a symbol light in its kingdom color. Once all glowed, a mist began to blow from underneath it, a short tremble as rocks and gears shifted, a

sound prominent that let them hear easily its age and the space it needed for its arise. Ludwig had to grasp Feliciano's arm to move him away as it began its growth, upward like a cabinet, a largeness like a bookcase in a library, extending far to let each of the old orbs give its alight in its own special case. They each floated on their own, two peeks receiving their energy and thus connecting it to the field. Each kingdom also held their own section, in impressive pillars of beauty that let Ludwig and Feliciano wondered for a moment, scared to reach it, scared to even touch it as they should. Even Ludwig had a slight shake as he went for his bag, searching around to find the staff, freeing it of its fabric and handing it over to Feliciano, who stared down to it in question.

"Start with the ones from the Diamond Kingdom," Ludwig obliged.

"Shouldn't we be placing them together?" Feliciano wondered.

"It doesn't matter." There was a hurrying in his tone, a push that forced Feliciano to come closer to the case, looking about it, wondering how he was even supposed to take the old ones out, how was he to place them, even how he was supposed to remove the new ones from the staff. Ludwig had told him enough times the spell, even where to place his holding, but the nervousness of the situation made him forget it all, frozen in place under this pedestal's tall ruling and shadow over them. A gaze to the distances worked enough of a push, a reminder of what they had to quickly control before it was too late. The sooner they did this, the better, that was the thought that had Feliciano take his holding, saying the spell and having all orbs release, momentarily floating before they all fell to the snow in waiting. He guessed he would have to take the old ones in the same staff to Rome…but how could he take them out from the pedestal?

Placing the staff on the floor along with the newer orbs, he tip toed to the orb that belonged to the past Diamond Jack, slowly placing his hands around it. After he wasn't electrocuted or surged with some hurtful magic, he began pulling it away, a hard feat as there was an invisible force that was still taking a harsh pull of it. Feliciano had to really grasp it and use a lot of power to remove it, finishing shown with the way the entire field alighted in a sudden dimmed yellow before it turned back to nothing.

Feliciano froze, embracing the old orb as a sort of protection for if something unexpected happened, but after nothing occurred in the continuing seconds, he took a deep breath, settling the old one on the floor, then taking Vash's, which he noticed now was heavier, glowing more intensely and with brighter colors than the one he just removed. Of course, the old one had been powering this field the last fifty years, it had weakened, all its juice was removed and needed these new ones.

Slowly he came forward, offering by extending, and the force inside it, upon recognizing its closeness, instantly swallowed it, granting the two peeks a new yellow color, the field accepting by letting a yellow line go all around it, as if spreading its power all throughout. It was the same procedure he had to do for the rest, finishing the ones from the Diamond Kingdom, then the Spade Kingdom and Club Kingdom until only the Heart Kingdom was left to complete. It was at this point that he returned his gaze to Ludwig, wanting to take a break to breathe.

Honestly this was tiring and stressing, even if he was merely placing orbs. He noticed then how far Ludwig had moved away from the pedestal, his eyes still on the depths of the field, having removed his black cloak and placed his bag on the floor.

“Ludwig…only ours are missing,” Feliciano made him know, yet he still refused to turn. “Ludwig?” And he still stood as poised, like he was forcing himself to be alone, a sudden determination in his eyes that made Feliciano worry. “Lud-”

“Just put them,” he interrupted.

“I’ve already placed most of them, I really think you should have a turn as well, it’s kind of unfair for only me to put them,” he tried to convince, turning completely to him hoping to be properly headed.

“Feliciano…please…just finish it…” a nervous tone, a sudden shake as he leaned to pick an item from the bag. Out came out the sheath of his sword, Ludwig inspecting, turning and placing it in the ready hold of his waist… as he was to face something.

“Ludwig…?” Feliciano began to question, leaning slightly closer.

With a breathe, a decide, he placed his hand on the grip and began to unsheathe it, the silver gleam of the blade shinning like the missing sun, exposed to reveal its piercing length, more a beauty than Feliciano had thought.

“Ludwig…what are you doing?” Feliciano trembled, scared.

“Feliciano, just please, finish placing all the orbs.”

“But…but…”

Ludwig took a swing and began a harsh piercing of the field wall, a crash like smashing against glass, shards even flying out as Ludwig imposed more of his sword throughout.

“Ludwig! What are you doing?!” Feliciano panicked, taking immediate speed towards him.

Ludwig, while keeping his grip continuing his crashing, gazed back to Feliciano with a new kind of fear tainting his eyes, mixing along with a feat, an ongoing perseverance that no words Feliciano could give would stop him. “Just keep placing them, ” he commanded harshly. “I’ll probably be inside by when you put yours. When that happens, I don’t think it will be possible for me to head out. Return to Berlin, tell everyone I’m dead,” he determined as he threw another harsher swing, leaving Feliciano to worsen his state, suddenly shaken and with watered eyes.

“Wha-what, what are you talking about?” He began to whimper, hoping to find some way to stop his swings, to pull his piercing out, but Ludwig always moved quickly on time, his force one that Feliciano couldn’t hold into a stop no matter how he moved. “Ludwig! What are you trying to do?! Ludwig!” Ignored, he continued, more shards, more of the field slowly alighting into his shots. “Ludwig! Don’t! Don’t! Don’t!” Feliciano shouted, trying to pull his hand away. “Don’t! Don’t! Please, stop! Stop! Just leave it be! Let’s just place the orbs and

head back!" Feliciano begged, trying to strengthen his grip, but Ludwig would just push him at any earned grip.

"Feliciano, just let me do this!" He continued on, vengeance in his eyes that made his piercing stronger.

"I can't let you! You possibly can't!" He whimpered.

"There's something I have to do!"

"Then what is it?"

"I can't let you know!"

"Please tell me!"

"No." Another harshened swing, the first holes created that he could use to better create his entrance.

"Is this about what was in the letter?" Feliciano suddenly mentioned, in a loud shout that was just enough to grant a stop to Ludwig, his swing half way while gazing to Feliciano with widened eyes of surprise.

"How do you know about it?" He tried hard not to be swayed by the tears that spilled from Feliciano's eyes.

"Ivan told me about it when he took me to a cave with all of Augusta's relics, he told me they didn't know what was in it, that it was meant for you and that it was written by Romulus," he admitted, hoping it be enough of a bridge, of an understanding for him to tell, to even stop him, but yet he still continued pointing his sword, ready any time to go at it again.

"Ludwig…" a begging that Ludwig let himself turn to, a pang for every tear that fell down his cheek, ones that part of him desperately wanted to move away with a sway of his thumb. "Please…tell me…tell me now…what was in that letter? Why are you doing this? What is it that you have to face?" There was a gentle look in Ludwig's expression, a scared childish one that held a lot of memory, a lot of past. There was care, but there was also fear, there was a lot of questioning, a lot of deciding, a lot of feelings that held him back, that made him sure long ago that he shouldn't, that he should just continue.

With his sword still in the shine of day, he pushed Feliciano aside to where the orbs lay. Quick, he took out the past Jack's, placing Kiku's, the usual acceptance and force he had seen of the field, then going on to take out Aldrich's and place his own.

"Ludwig! Stop!" Feliciano ran, knowing that there were ulterior motives than just placing, there was a plan formulated and it was just as Feliciano had it, it was just as he couldn't take it, an angering force that gave him just enough strength.

When Ludwig's was placed, only the Queen's left to remove and place Feliciano's, Feliciano instead, while Ludwig was distracted, pushed him. In a quick movement, he grabbed his own sword, tripped him with a quick swish of his feet, and before he recognized enough to stand,

Feliciano landed harshly on him, taking a sitting on his stomach and stabbing the sword only inches away from his face. Ludwig was struck into place, in one part surprised over what Feliciano just did, another for the grip his arising Queen had on his weapon, menacingly close with an angry expression that burned like fire, his heavy breathing dangerous, ready to poison.

“I’ve had it!” He practically growled, Pookie sitting by a distance watching with his own fear tainted expression. “I’ve had enough of your hiding and silence, I’ve had enough of waiting, I’ve had enough of suffering because of this, because of you!” He shouted, a menacing anger that showcased indeed how much he had stopped being patient, yet tears continued to flow, these ones now falling and staining Ludwig’s white suit.

“You’re telling me…You’re telling me right now!” He screamed with much more cut, the grip on the sword harder, pushing it deeper into the ground. “I won’t let you go until you tell me, and I swear, if you keep up with excuses, I will…I will…” Feliciano knew he couldn’t impose such violence, and so he only trembled, tears continuing to fall and stain, hurting him now, hating himself for how it weakened him. All of a sudden he wished he could hide this misery, yet he stayed in his position thinking, thinking truly that this time…this time…

He suddenly felt fingers on his cheek, soft, with caress, with real intent and managing to brush some tears aside, until that very grasp held and rubbed so kindly on the back of his head and Feliciano couldn’t help but lean towards it, although his still prominent question, hold of the sword and insisting.

“It’s…many things,” Ludwig for once admitted.

“I don’t care, tell me…tell me everything!” Feliciano still commanded, some remains of his anger still strong, forcing Ludwig more into the telling.

The prince had given up then, letting his head fall to the snow in comfort, preparing, taking deep breathes, eyes on the back of his head as he adjusted what he would say first, how he could even finish. He made a testing gaze to the field, wondering if there was still a chance of escape, but the hold Feliciano had of him, begging, destroyed, shaking, willing to do just anything for real answers this time, and honestly he was afraid as to how Feliciano could react, what he could do, especially in this state that was best he didn’t try, that he released and finally told.

“Other than Romulus’s letter, King Yura, Queen Adrian and Jack Anikó had written inside an explanation about what had really happened. They specified not to tell you since at some point you will be shown the relics and the current Clubian royals will explain it to you, so I obediently remained shut, but I let myself learn about Augusta, Pisa and Keron, about Romulus’s reality, the hand of creation, the prophecies, the lineage, the star alignment…how you’re going to face Khaos and then take your place as the new Ace of Hearts.” His tone saddened, in his head reminding images of pain and hurt, of losing. “It was afterwards that I read the letter…” he took a sigh, a grip on his hands that lay on the snow beneath, a clear gulp, a misery in his eyes that Feliciano saw, loosening slightly his hold in worry.

“You know about…how Augusta hoped that Romulus was alive, that somehow his spirit and soul had been captured by Khaos…” Feliciano nodded, remembering, knowing it was one of

the reasons why Augusta couldn't celebrate Khaos's defeat, spending her last years in their world in misery and even creating a more imperial side to Romulus's story just to get people to remember him and perhaps return him.

"…She was right, he did… survive, in a way," Ludwig admitted, an instant faltering to Feliciano's movement that gave the blond more ease from the heavy weight he imposed.

"What?" How could it be possible?

"The letter was written many years after his death…"

"…huh?" Feliciano couldn't think it easy.

"And although he was the one who sent the message…it wasn't his hand who wrote it, but my own ancestor's, Soren."

Feliciano trembled with confusion, seen in the way the sword shook. "Ludwig, please, don't lie to me, tell me the truth, tell me what was actually-"

"I am." No fault, no eyes or avoiding direction, these were all the words of the actuality, all for Feliciano to hear.

When silence was settled once again, Ludwig continued. "As Augusta suspected, Khaos did take Romulus's soul, spirit, energy and magic, only destroying completely the body that held it."

"Then why wasn't it released?" Feliciano commanded.

"Khaos did release it, just not immediately and how Augusta expected. There were some things he wanted to do." There was dread in his voice, a gulp. "After his original betrayal from Augusta, he learned to really plan his actions and be prepared for any outcome, and so, he knew what to do in the possibility that he failed in the war…if he didn't defeat Augusta in Rome as he wished." Another wave of fault, a shake, his breath even faltering.

"Khaos knows of the next alignment, he knows Augusta sought to create something more powerful to really defeat him, but because of the hiding of the relics and her story being ceased, he didn't manage to know of her own combine to the hand of creation, of her own send through the lineage of your family, but he determined to find out, which is why he constantly sends out Khaos's men to search, but if he didn't or doesn't…he's already got something to use against her for the next war…" Ludwig feared to say the next, eyes avoiding.

"With all the years of the war…with all the years he held Romulus's essence…he tainted it, he brought it to darkness, under his power and commanding to do as he wished. It was like this that he decided to release it…" Once again he was hesitant, he was scared and it was only bringing Feliciano more anxiousness. "Khaos actually thought something very similar to Augusta, and that was sending it through a lineage to get more energy, more power. He thought of sending it through Augusta's very own, but he somehow figured she would be doing something similar, so instead…as a competition, as to put her to fight one of her two

most dear people together …he decided to send it through Soren's lineage in one of the battles." He told, then stopping with a quivering breath as he tried to relax, as Feliciano continued with shock, so much as to even stop his tears.

"I don't…I don't understand…how could he do this? How-how could he? Soren was not blood related to Romulus."

"No…but Khaos suspected that as a reward for his friendship to both of them, a new kingship would continue in his line, thus he knew Soren's relatives would be granted at some point Ace power to be king, queen or even jack, which could add to Romulus's own power in its passing through, but there was something that went wrong though." Ludwig was wary about it, but he believed deeply in the chance. "Romulus's power was sent through the Beilschmidts only through energy, unlike Augusta's that was passed through not only energy and magic, but also through soul, blood and body, thus each had their chance in adding to the power something personal, each keeping their own singularity, as well as holding blood and even magic by Romulus himself. Because Romulus was not connected to my own lineage as successfully as perhaps Khaos would have wanted, it meant that the power wasn't mended well with the people it passed through, wasn't made prominent and even I don't know how to use his power …but it meant that he could take an ounce of control at the beginning, to communicate…use some last energy of himself that Khaos hadn't affected yet to write a message through Soren… a warning to me, the one the power would act upon by the next alignment."

Feliciano panicked at what it could mean, making Ludwig lose his wording with every harshened breath, just wanting to quickly say it to not let it continue jarring his heart as it was. "Like you, like Khaos, Romulus warned that I would receive my own surge through the alignment…with his power that is within me now, mended and ruined to join Khaos…into a form of my own that I don't know how bad it could turn into…of what could happen to me… and go against Augusta…against you…"

Dreaded silence, dreaded breaths, Feliciano still in his shake.

"He wrote to me of how I could stop it, everything I could do to weaken it. He actually sent the letter before my eighteenth birthday because he wanted me to get an early power activation to start releasing out. Lucky for me, I did when I was only seven years old, which meant more had escaped…but it wouldn't be enough." He had to take a breath, had to settle his words and speech. "He told me to avoid uniting my magic with you, for it would only make it stronger, he warned me to not get too close to you, to avoid any kind of feelings that would drive us more into friendship…or to even fall in love…it would only intensify it." Another gulp, full of loss, full of a determination he couldn't fulfill. "He told me to only do the necessary the kingdom would ask…show myself as a respectful and powerful coming king, get married, provide an heir that hopefully his essence wouldn't pass through to…and when the time reached for when I had to head to the field to place the new validity spheres… he told me to escape and break into the field, saying that the kingdom sword would be enough for me to create an opening."

"Why…why would he suggest that?" Tears once again spread and fell, strong pain going through all his movements as the news pierced and damaged.

“So I could face Khaos,” he plain simply said, which only worsened Feliciano’s movements of fear.

“Yo-you ca-can’t! You can’t! He-he’ll be too powerful! He’ll easily-he’ll easily-”

“Kill me? That’s the point.”

How could Ludwig say it so nonchalantly like that?

“No-no-no, why-why, don’t…don’t!” He let himself to the whimpers and sobs.

“To stop myself from being his pawn in the next war. If I face him, I could perhaps weaken him using his own power against him. If it doesn’t work…at least he’s the only one that can rid of me before I hurt and destroy my own world… and the odds would be more at your favor.”

Feliciano only trembled, his vision now completely blinded by his tears, letting the sword drop in a clang, his hands coming to his face to stop himself from looking like such a mess, but he couldn’t control, he couldn’t stop.

“It-It doesn’t have to be like this! There has to be…there has to be another way!” He sobbed, weakened to the point that he let himself fall upon Ludwig’s chest, letting those very tears stain his suit, confident to wrap his arms around him, keeping him, caging him, not letting him drive himself away like that, anything to keep him here still, in getting from his alleviating warmth despite the storm inside him. Ludwig let himself wrap his arms around him, holding him close, a hand caressing at his hair as he let him indulge in all the tears landing on his chest.

“There are no writings or explanations about this, all I can do is simply…what Romulus suggested…”

Another silence, of winds blowing, of cold growing and even snow piling over them.

“Why would you do this…why would do this?” Feliciano whispered in insistence.

“To protect you from losing me… from having to fight against me, to not let you depress as Augusta had done when she lost Romulus… so you could be stronger for when you faced Khaos and save our world…and take your place as Ace without having to worry about me,” he admitted in a loving whisper that both made Feliciano elate but also fail into more tears.

“You failed…” Feliciano punctuated in a whimper against his chest, “you failed…because despite everything… I kept remembering our promises…I kept dreaming of a beautiful chance with you…and in this trip you showed me a new side that I could learn to adore as I had once done…and so I never gave up, I didn’t give up no matter how hard you pushed, your actions, your words, your ignorance…because there was always a part of me strong that knew…that knew there was still something more that you were just hiding, a part that wanted to be with me and show all the compassion and loyalty and new emotions to our adulthood that I knew were there… and I can’t…I can’t lose you… not without giving you and me that chance… I won’t bare your act for me, I won’t be able to live through it…It’ll just make me

weaker, there won't be a day I won't cry about this, so please…please…don't do this…don't do this…"

Ludwig gazed up to the sky, as if hoping it could remove the tears that welled in his own eyes, to erase them, to erase these feelings, to stop himself from holding him so dearly as he was.

"We'll find a way…we'll find a way… there has to be…" Feliciano really wanted him to hope, to escape…but it wasn't that easy to dispatch himself from… after all he did to try and fulfill this.

Ludwig sighed in disappointment, in welcome to his failure of not being able to drive him away from the feelings that now he realized…were bound to happen…and as he smiled and tucked his arms more closely around him, he lay defeated, enjoying from that last hold…that last warmth…settling his eyes back on the missing orb and awaiting panel…before he pushed Feliciano back on the floor, using the sword to stab his cloak on the ground and cage him there.

It was all too quick and sudden. By the time Ludwig had rushed to pick Feliciano's orb, the arising Queen was still dumbfounded, lost still in his emotions, paralyzed, more so when the tight hold of the sword didn't let him run on time.

"Ludwig, no! No! No! No! Please no!" He shouted, but it didn't stop Ludwig from removing his own grandmother's orb, selfishly throwing it to the ground, in an instant letting the panel accept Feliciano's…the most powerful, taking Ace magic for the first time in centuries… Ludwig had to be quick.

"Ludwig! Ludwig!" Feliciano continued to shout as Ludwig ran by him, picking up his sword, granting Feliciano freedom, but by the time he was standing and trying to reach him, Ludwig gave that final blow that shattered completely, giving him a small opening to enter to a more piercing cold. Before Feliciano could join him, his very validity sphere did the last of the spreading, of the fortifying, the light scanning through in front of them, enough of a potent to have Feliciano pushed off, Ludwig having to pierce the sword to the ground and holding to it tightly so he wouldn't fall off as the new spheres took their reigning, as they began their full energizing, the field stronger, regenerating the broken back to strength and transparency, not a space for Feliciano to enter, laying at the other side in separation.

"Ludwig! Ludwig!" He cried, stumbling as he stood, taking leverage against the field, hands scratching as if trying to reach him inside, but now the field was more impenetrable and not a mark was left, no ripple. No smash of his fist was enough, only his cries and his shouts could be heard, all clear for Ludwig, who began his straighten, taking continuation of his breathing, his glance in direction to the mountains in the distance. He sheathed back his sword, he tried to order himself as bravely as he could, spreading back any strand of hair that had fallen and removing snow that rested on him. He was ready to go on forward…but not before turning to Feliciano, coming near, his head seeming to lay upon his, hands coming together to lay on each other despite the wall of transparency separating them, away from Feliciano's warmth, his soft skin, even the wetness of his tears.

“Since I failed and I’m going to die, I might as well tell you this, I love you.” It was enough of a startle to bring Feliciano to a stunning, frozen and perplexed. “I never stopped…it just changed from that of friendship to something else. I think I’ve desired you from the moment we met again at the table…it made this so hard…so hard to hurt you, to be so cruel to you, to have to push you away when my heart craved for you like nothing I had ever felt…but I knew it had to be this way…I knew it was the only way to save you.” He gripped his hands upon the field, dreading that he couldn’t have his touch, his embrace once again, in his truth, in his admitting.

“Lu-Ludwig, no-no, there could have been a way! Yo-you could have told me earlier! We could have managed, we could have searched together for something to help us both with this, you didn’t have to do this! You could have let us be together.” Feliciano gripped as well, wishing he could bury his head to feel more of him.

“Why would you suffer for me like this? I treated you like I did to drive you away no matter how much I wanted you, right now you shouldn’t have cared, right now you should have moved away back to Berlin…happy…”

“I can’t believe you would expect me to be that evil, that unforgiving, I possibly cannot live happy like this,” He continued to whimper.

“You can…Feliciano, you have an amazing opportunity before you…you’re going to be a god, an Ace…you don’t deserve me, you don’t deserve a mere king with hidden tainted magic…you deserve far greater than I can give you…” he whispered with loss, accepting to his nothingness compared to the one he loved.

“It all means nothing if I can’t have you, if it drives me away from you. I don’t want this…I don’t want any of this, I just want you by my side, I just want to live my life with you.” He shed more, his loosing breaths making him choke many times, harsher in his push as if trying to pull Ludwig back.

“Please, just get over me, I’m not worth all these tears, just smile, give me the chance to see that smile one last time,” he still desired.

“How could you possibly ask that from me? How could you possibly ask when you’re making me this miserable?” So much he tried to lay against the field that even tears began to fall from its clearness.

For minutes on Feliciano tried to hang on and Ludwig let himself believe that there was something still willing to save him as he remained in that invisible hold, seeming to rest, wanting to imagine he would be in his safe cradle.

“Ludwig… I love you, please, please…don’t…don’t.” He poured every beg, every sincerity in the shine of his eyes, every force in his body that could get Ludwig to convince…but it just made him more decided on what he was trying to save and what he was doing to guarantee him a peaceful world he could live in and reign.

“For you, mein Leben,” he whispered tenderly, reaching his hand to caress the wall as if it could take his face, as if it could lean his chin to his lips and oh so badly did Feliciano wish

that leaning, letting them exchange cold breaths that really did not connect, a distraction of bliss…before Ludwig decided, turning away and starting on his march.

“Ludwig…Ludwig! Ludwig!” Feliciano shouted, screamed, punched and kicked on the wall to try and get him to return, but he couldn’t continue forward as Ludwig did, smaller and smaller as he went on to face an incredible danger.

“Ludwig! Ludwig!” He still hoped, he still continued, he tried harder in his forces against the wall, but it only began to bruise and redden his skin, and even with the pulsing he went on, letting his voice hoarse, letting himself weaken, watching as Ludwig continued onward, turning into but a haze that began to mix well with the blizzard he was now reaching, lost and gone.

“Ludwig…Ludwig…Ludwig…” Feliciano’s voice had died down, his throat now hurting him, his punches and kicks surely nothing, not a message, not a call, he was now completely alone, his friend, his love, gone, in there and there was nothing he could do but fall to his knees and sob whatever was left of his energy over the field.

“Please come back…please come back…” he whimpered, he shivered, he trembled, his arms around himself, not wanting this cloak’s warmth, but that last one Ludwig had given him, for once with true loving, what he wanted, what he craved…only but the chance of a couple of minutes that now was only ghosted. That was the only full paradise he could have with Ludwig…now gone with no other in the future, away as a sacrifice for himself that he did not accept, that he could not take, that he wished more could have been done without settling in this, without this drastic decision that now would officially leave him kingless, loveless, unhappy, darkening and lost…so lost. As a mess he slumped to the ground, defeated and vulnerable, glued to the new melancholy that settled well completely throughout in a matter of minutes.

“Please…please…” he still had in him enough to say in the silent white, in the nothingness of only himself, as he was completely drained of even tears now.

“I won’t let you lose him like I did…” came a sudden voice, an echo that Feliciano couldn’t point, suddenly startled, wondering what it could have possibly been when he was the only one for miles.

“Huh?”

Suddenly he was accepting, suddenly there was an approval, a dedication, taking control and powering the movement of his hands. While he lay weakened upon the wall, his arm raised until it gripped harshly on the glass-like force, starting the beginning of a crack and a powerful red glow in between.

Chapter 48

Chapter Notes

> I apologize greatly for the time it took me, several personal things, a hurricane, no electricity, no signal, classes starting…it's not been easy…but as always just be patient and I hope the contents can be worth the wait. Thank you so much and I hope you enjoy this chapter.

His castle had no magnificence.

There were no murals, no paintings, no sculptures, no flourishing of flowers, symbols, or even stories. It was only but dark stone, cold, decaying, perhaps an occasional carving one of his men would create, a rug, a tapestry with symbols of himself, of his old kingdom in the heavens, to grant a little color, a little finesse even in his imprisonment. His men would sometimes bring him golden and gilded cups, plates, utensils, tables and even beds that they stole from the kingdoms from time to time, and he would use them as if they were rightfully his, placed and in care only proper for the items of a king…a god.

He never let anyone disrespect that, never let any forget, despite how the whole world did.

To remind he dined on salmon niçoise, saag paneer, squid with capers, apple charlotte, mango and passion fruits with elegancy in the hold of his forks and knives, slow in his bites, tasting well every piece, every flavor, a smile in celebration to himself, to this delicacy only he enjoyed from in the castle, in silence, in calm, all this feast to replenish as he pleased.

He was careful with this specific dark silk robe, engraved in gold like splendorous stardust, loose, excellent comfort for him to lean back, letting himself moan at the taste and exalt.

Servants knew, they trained, they practiced to take their steps in just the mellow their king wanted, as this current one did, tippy toing in the best hurry she could, a slight tremble in her hands that she tried to control by covering them in her long sleeves, even numbering her breaths to not disturb a trace of the regal air he had made in the last minutes.

"Your majesty…" she introduced, in just the right intonation that she knew would not awry with the organized balance of peace and silence.

"Angela, my darling, speak," he smiled and flew in his position of rest.

"Rodion's group has returned."

"Splendid, let them in, let them in," he was glad and accepting, with a welcoming grin, excitement in the sitting he took as the group entered at the servant's signal, the three damaged, marked, burned, ruined armors showing the rust and force of whatever past mission

they have been sent on. Their king smiled on uncaring to these blemishes, uniting his hands and leaning his posture towards them like a curious child awaiting a story.

“Tell me, how did it go?” The smile he showed was wide and true, but it didn’t stir any confidence, the men feared and looked among each other as they readied to say the words they had prepared. Their main leader, who stood frontal, took a sigh to make himself grow strong, spear at his side standing just as linear as he determined to keep while he told the news.

“There were more soldiers than we had expected,” he started with. “Rightfully armored, strong magic, countless of men and women that our little numbers could not stand against.”

“I gave you thirty men,” the king reminded, beginning a strain as he rubbed his fingers on his temple, not a very good sign to the three.

“We were going against sixty.”

“Jokers, sixty jokers guarding something that surely holds no interest to the current King and Queen of Hearts. They shouldn’t have been this prepared with a sudden entering like this," his voice began to alter and anger.

“May I remind that the prince and the arising queen are currently on the journey. The kingdoms know our numbers increased outside of the field with its weakened state and are doing all the necessary precautions, even jokers.”

It was still not sufficient enough to their king, who groaned and tightened his grip on the chair.

“You should have been a stronger match compared to them,” he determined through gritted teeth.

“Your majesty, you didn’t give us the right men or the sufficient amount. Perhaps if you-” all interrupted in a choke, a dark enchantment piercing, a burning and eating spreading at the shot of his stomach. He cracked and darkened like the very stones of this castle, falling to ashes and pieces on the floor, eyes lolled and color disappearing until his presence completely ceased in a snap of their king’s hand, a horror to the other two who watched, who could only stand and accept like they had seen it happen before.

They gazed upward to see their king hold true darkness in his eyes, maddened and stilled, uncaring to the events, he simply rubbed his hands on his robe as if all had just been an annoying spot to rid.

“You all know what I feel against such insolence…about raised voices out of line…and you know well how I repay,” he warned yet again, baring his rule and power to them, a force he knew made them shake, swallow and sweat.

“Off with you, make Fergus the new command of your group, have him meet with me in the throne room, we shall discuss his new position,” he decreed, ushering them away with a

simple be gone of his hand, leaning to get his glass of wine as his hunger died and was replaced with a new urgency.

Angela then entered to face him in the usual position, doing well to ignore the shattered corpse on the ground beside her.

“Clean that up,” he pointed uncaringly to the body, standing once he had emptied his glass, “and take this back to the kitchen, the cooks and servants may share.”

She bowed in acceptance, trying not to lick her lips in expectation as she watched him pick up and make his way out the halls and into the new line of preparations.

All servants that saw him would instantly stop in an altering, bow and carry on with harshened speeds on their earlier duties while their king remained with his eyes forward, angered and sharpened until he reached the height of his room to change.

Beautiful stitches, belts, even vested symbols upon a large thick robe, soft to his skin, long to trail behind him as if empowering the very ground he walked upon.

Yes, he thought himself a handsome beauty like this, walking with all that elegance and regency to the throne room, but to the servants he wore his tyranny and lash, ready any moment to invoke death and suffering in the raise of his palm and fingers.

The opening of the large doors was enough of a silencer to bring whatever murmurs of the room into nothing, for all the men to straighten in force ready for any kind of disposition that would lead them off to war.

Their king made his way across in his ever preferred sways, the men not giving a movement or breath out of place until their king found his sitting in the dark carved chair, placing himself in the ruling he belonged and was prepared to invoke at the moment.

“Furgus,” he called, and thus this man came frontal, with a readied robe, slight armor, a proud staff of energizing dark magic in his tight hold, to use whenever he so wanted to fulfill the needs of his superior.

“Rodion disappointed me. I placed him out of the way and now grant you this position based on your other feats and missions. You have done sufficient, I don’t expect to see failure and thus can immediately set you forward on the same task.” There was a hidden growl even in the respectful way he spoke, how easily his words came out like a practiced taunt, which made many more men incline themselves.

“Rodya!” He called to another man this time, making his side by his other companion, in the same bow to the floor, cutlass at his side as the source and force of his power.

“Since Vinicio failed me in the Washington attack, he and his squadron had been dealt with accordingly. It leaves me with fewer men outside the field in the Spade Kingdom and in need of replacing his factions. You will then take his place, watch, plan rightfully this time. Don’t

disappoint me, or else you know how grave the consequences can be," he growled with his ever proud dignity on the sit of his chair, with rest and confidence, yet an intent that made all trembled as they accepted to the force of this command.

"Are you perhaps requesting another attack on the city?"

"Only what you can do, but I'm warning you that I expect some sort of outcome. As of now the new spheres of validity must have already been placed, but we can still try our usual exits." He stood, walking forward, silk of robes falling and trailing, extending his hands in order.

"I don't expect it to be an easy task from now on, but perhaps that hadn't been the case if we had captured them as I wanted," he aggravated that reminder, blaming gazes to all of them, all at fault.

"But our plans continue on as usual. I shall organize a meeting soon, going further into detail about further suggestions-" a slash, at speeds flying centimeters away from the perfection he had of his pale skin, the slickness of his black hair and his groomed beard. The weapon landed in a harsh stab against the center of the throne, its shaking creating an echo that silenced the room into a new sudden kind of fear. It had been a dagger, not of their darkened kind, but in clear silver, white, and of course…red, with familiar Heart symbols that left no room for the king to doubt.

The crowd instantly hurried trying to find the direction it had come from, a swarm already preparing their weapons and strategies to rain upon the traitor or the invader.

The King quickly found it, up on a darkened tunnel before him, old, an entrance that long ago he had forgotten and didn't bother to question or fix. He saw the hand that fell, the oh so familiar blue eyes from long ago that glared into his darkened ones, bright enough to practically glow in the hidden spot he had taken, but it didn't hold its meaning long enough when the king had clearly spotted him, with a grin that was welcoming despite the uncomfortable laughter. The long vibration was enough to halt the rooms' searching and arming, questioning and scared as they tried to find a reason for it just after that kind of dagger threatened to aim directly at their king.

"Ludwig, Ludwig, Ludwig, here I thought you wouldn't ever grace me with your visit. What pleasantries and honor," he provoked loudly, only as he should because of their far distance, but also because of the constant empowering he wanted to do, especially before the prince of Hearts, the arising king of Hearts.

Ludwig only continued his glare, still not daring to move away from the shield of the shadow, wanting to instill enough killing in only his eyesight. It did nothing to faze Khaos, who only placed his arms in front of himself, smiling away in no bothers and intimidation, confident even in such a bareness, such a meet.

Ludwig bared his sword, not wanting to move forward without its companionship. Finally some semblance of light revealed him completely, in those annoying whites that reminded Khaos of his sister, no mercy or care in his eyes about the decease he had caused himself.

It was then that all eyes in the room noticed him, with gasps, prepares, and starting release of their magic ready to inflict on the single enemy that came alone with no kind of shield showing protection.

Ludwig was uncaring to the sudden attention, the wavering menace that was ready to kill in each and every direction, the only shining light in a sea of darkness, with only but a handful of weapons that all thought couldn't stand enough, but Ludwig was determined to make it last all that it needed.

He took a leap to the floor below, surrounded, but all knowing well to not attack yet as King Khaos had not commanded and they didn't see him as much as a threat.

How mistaken they had been.

While their king was distracted enough in the continuing connection of their eyes transmitting hatred and vengeance, Ludwig turned and stabbed his sword right through one man's chest, a last scream erupting before they all began tumbling forward with their own different forces. Clang of swords, of fists, punches, kicks, growls, shouts. A dance of killing and disorder as Ludwig faced each one with either a slash of coated dark blood, a sting of bright fire, or the very force of his body, throws of his side and head, a growing pile of bodies surrounding him. With every hit, every cut, every bruise he himself received, the temptation for his body to join in the mess of deceased somehow seemed more relieving and liberating, but a perseverance continued him forward in his attacks and throws, many more falling under his strength. Khaos? He did nothing as he watched on with incredible interest, like this was all some show that amused him well.

He had to admit, Ludwig shone just as tall, strong and skillful as Soren had once been. A Beilschmidt indeed, with all the pride of the name and fitting for the position of a king. That thought was enough of a sickening, of a detest, it provoked annoyance to the mess going around, of the game, clattering and disorder.

"Enough!" He shouted, with the spur of a shadow spreading all across the room as quick as lightning. It was a blow enough to have all his men immediately stop, dizzying and disorientated, while keeping a tight hold around Ludwig, all his movements stopped as a dark shadow wrapped around him, constraining him to pain and groans, trying what he could to escape.

All could let themselves to breathe, to let their weapons fall, cuts ooze and for others to help each with their wounds how they could, while Ludwig was brought forward until he was right before Khaos, in all the clarity and flesh that left nothing to doubt.

He was tall and robust as himself, with strong jaw and features that could convey elegance and beauty, with darkness in his eyes, his hair, beard and clothes, but skin pale enough to compare to the snow that fell outside. Right now, he seemed so plain and human compared to the images Ludwig had made from the tales and what he later studied.

All that power, darkness, evil… in such a normal daily form that made one forget and doubt. Ludwig had to remind himself that this was just a guise, a curse given to him by the Aces

during the original creation, then strengthened by Augusta after his defeat in the war of the blackened decades.

As he examined in the constrain of his shadowed bounds, Khaos came close enough as for Ludwig to feel his breath upon his skin, eyes cutting and analyzing like he was but a mere subject to an experiment.

“How wonderful, perfect, couldn’t have asked or created anything better,” he smiled, sickening and awful. Ludwig wanted to bite off his chuckle in all the savageness of skin and blood that he deserved.

"Oh please, stop looking this angry, you were the one who wanted to pay me a visit. Perhaps if you hadn’t been so violent I could have prepared a banquet, something nice that would have made you proud to join me,” he tried to coax.

“I don’t intend to be in any part of your plans,” Ludwig barked, flinching forward, gripping his hands as if it could make him believe he could go ahead and choke him. Khaos only rolled his eyes, taking sitting once again in his throne, in his usual comfort even with the situation.

“What a child, should have expected as much after the reports I was receiving.”

Instant question was in Ludwig’s eyes no matter how he tried to advert it, but nothing could truly hide from Khaos’s judgment.

“You really think I wouldn’t have spies and messengers in your city telling me every rumor and story? Boy, I’ve been keeping an eye on you from the moment your arising queen was born. I practically know you like your own grandfather,” he was confident.

“Don’t you dare compare yourself to family. You are nothing to me, nothing,” he spat in a harsh growl.

“Ah, but in a way, we are,” he smiled, only intensifying the harshness in Ludwig’s eyes and the sharp of his teeth.

“I haven’t forgotten what I gave long ago to your ancestor, about what’s been boiling through your lineage ready to release with you,” he reminded happily, enjoying the different kind of ways Ludwig’s angering marked his expression uglier.

“Think about it boy, that kind of power, control, everything you could ever want, everything you despise out of your path, I can even let you reign with me in the new world, a sort of Jack, or a general, surely with a more splendorous throne than anything the Hearts kingdom could give you,” he tried to convince, sure about his persuasion, but to Ludwig it was all insult, in which he wanted to pay in a fight and a killing.

“I’d rather you killed me right now!” He threatened, he lashed and moved, hoping for a freeing, a chance to fight before that kind of killing reached him.

He was not going to be defeated like this, in a clutch, without a battle, so easily in the hold that Khaos wanted.

“Oh no, no, no, absolutely not, kill my own work like that after thousands of years, unacceptable.”

And for the first time Ludwig’s eyes widened in worry, in question and nervousness that left him cornered. Khaos had smirked…but it quickly turned into a groan as Ludwig continued to quiver in his confines, still wanting escape, blood, killing. No matter, now he could persevere knowing that Khaos wouldn’t dare kill him wanting his use.

“Don’t overcomplicate things, you’re stuck here until the next alignment and the more accepting you become, the better. I don’t need you disobeying me.” Like scolding a small child, a feeling that Ludwig intensely hated and it just made his resolve stronger, his wish for escape, a kind of ripping going through the shadowed rope. Khaos had to intensify it before Ludwig could reach an outing.

“I will disobey, I won’t stop until I’ve seen your skull smashed to pieces!” He shouted, jumping, nearing, two men having to rush and add to the hold, Ludwig trying what he could to shake them off, but the force on him was potent enough, more so when a third had to join.

Angela had then arrived, especially after she heard the word that quickly spread through the castle, not showing any kind of interest to the new face, but only obedience to Khaos as she stood beside him, fearful and trembling as always.

“How rude, how brash, certainly no behavior for a king.” Khaos laid with outmost calm, even checking his nails as his men dealt with constraining the invader, who kept on fighting, trying to land some kind of blow on any of them to make this easier and manageable. Not a care Khaos gave as his men suffered any blows or bruises. It was whatever it took to get Ludwig to halt, to accept to his quick defeat.

“Your majesty, what should we do with him?” Angela questioned, intimidated by the invader’s snarls and piercing savage eyes.

That moment Ludwig landed a kick on one of the men’s groin, having him fall and even loose breathe just as another came, just as Ludwig managed a blow against one’s head with his own. Khaos laughed, raising his hand yet again, creating a shadow to tie around his mouth, ceasing any kind of movements of his head and neck, only to angry mumbles wanting to bite it off, his eyes rising to Khaos with his still vengeful spirit.

“Accept him as one of our own, of course.”

Ludwig detested, detested, detested, the fire in the burn of his eyes growing.

“But in the meantime, while he reflects and comes to turn to his destiny, he shall be kept in the cellars, our coldest one, that will serve him enough. I’ll keep an eye on him…see if I can…” he began to watch his hands, concocting and brewing ideas that alighted his eyes with excitement. All the possibilities, all the new he could add, and with a whole year before it, a whole year to make him quiver and test the limits of his resistance. Ah yes, a cold and

weakened body, to ruins, nothing once what was truly inside him would be released for the new alignment. "…rile him up, test a little of what that wretched Romulus left behind for him," he smirked and decided, waving his hand away as a command to get him moving. Four men had to come to add to the restrain, while Ludwig kept fighting, kept testing those restrains as men continued what they could to barricade him.

As the room scurried, as all the men began to move, staring to Ludwig's retreating form, whispers of worry and plan arose. Some wanted to follow and help, others wanted to remain in the room to continue hearing their leader speak of new commands and tasks. Khaos just settled, ignorant of all and just wanting some rest for his thoughts to proceed and plot, wonderful ideas that could get Ludwig to break.

Once again it was interrupted by another slam, other steps, an angry kind of intimidating aura that began to reign all across the room…and all so familiar and beautiful one that made Khaos momentarily sway.

"Now what," he complained, rolling his eyes, having to awake from his thoughts.

All the earlier mess stopped in an instant. Between the crowds a single shinning figure made his way between, bravely, with head held high and more intimidating with the addition of a St. Mark walking just as regally beside him. Khaos did not want to think who it was, none of them wanted to, but a new kind of trembling went through all as they began to recognize well the kind of presence that reigned, the powerful steps, strong grip of hands and stature that made one fearful to approach, all moving aside to grant this figure all the necessary space, none daring to disturb, to go against, some even refused to look. Khaos decided to take one last calming breath before he would settle his eyes on this new welcoming, giving a moment of last flight in his mind, a closing, a fall of his head until it could balance itself to look forward, for his eyes to open and meet.

It was a boy, dressed in very similar whites to Ludwig, but the intensity of his red eyes, of the marks that covered his body, even the intense growl that formed in his mouth didn't seem to go with the sweetness he had expected from the reports about no other than Feliciano Valenti.

No, the magic that arose, the intensity, the power…the familiarity.

This was not Feliciano Valenti, no, but his beloved, his creation, his past wife, all the same radiance and wonder even with intent to kill.

"Augusta! How long and what luck for me to receive two such important guests in the span of minutes. Is there a celebration that I missed? Don't you worry, I can have my servants whip us a feast in no time," he dared smile and continue his challenging eyes, arms extended in welcome even as the figure continued to remain in the same harshness he had entered in, bearing so much fire that even Khaos let his hand fall under them, seeming to wonder what could be the problem.

He was pretending, she knew, hiding and uncaring as always.

"And here I thought a thousand more years could have changed something about you, but you're still as ignorant as the days of beginning." It was rather odd for such a womanly voice

to be heard from the figure of a young man, having to go along with the expressions and movements of this past woman, goddess, Ace, like a puppet, a vessel as it should be. Like it was her own body, taking immediate owning of it, she wrapped her arms on her chest, scolding and wanting, one of command that already asked. It really was like she was before him once again. It added that Feliciano looked remarkably like her, making it hard for differences to be pointed out.

“Aw, it’s nice to know that you held some ounce of belief for me,” he brought a hand forward to his chest touched.

“I believe chances should be granted to all, but you test my belief in that.” No doubt, no backing down, no fear in those eyes, even as Khaos stood trying to intimidate her with his stature, all the men around her with sharp weapons, the very dark dome and pillars that held this castle of evil ruin. She learned to see it as nothing, confidence shining more with her as the lion beside her took a sitting, showing honor and respect despite the cruelty of this king.

“It’s like no time has passed. You’re still the same child,” he laughed, beginning his steps down wanting to truly be frontal before her.

“You out of all dare tell me this? Reason it is enough to burn this vessel of yours to make it as unseemly as you truly are,” she threatened, with ready spite to attack in every movement of his lips.

Khaos dared come closer, he dared stand right before her, their heat close, sickening and maddening to her, but as a testing she remained as she was, hatred still shinning deep in those eyes. He extended a hand and yet she didn’t budge, the only movement in the room was that of Ludwig’s from afar, who witnessed everything with worry and unsettlement. The men who kept a hold of him had stop to stare at this confrontation between their king and his early first creation, at a distance where Ludwig could see everything, trying harder to release himself, more when he saw Khaos give that deploring closeness to Feliciano. To worsen his fear, he saw as Khaos lay a caressing hand on Feliciano’s cheek, a sick smile that made Ludwig want to punch it out more, intensifying his force in trying to release himself from these grasps.

“This new vessel you take is quite interesting,” Khaos let himself compliment as Augusta grimaced, as Feliciano trembled inside in deep fear, yet still, yet letting.

Khaos brought himself closer, for their faces to only lay centimeters by each other, breaths close, more fear igniting in Feliciano below.

“Even as a man you’re as desirable and beautiful. Yes, I don’t mind it, I like this form very much,” he licked his lips, his closeness beginning for more, riling more Ludwig in his distance, back to his kicking and punching for a release.

“I can want it,” he grinned, closer and closer, pass barriers neither did Feliciano and Augusta accept.

There was a sudden burning grip on his arm, lightening in a red glow that buried them in a haze, the intense of her hold showing her anger, her defense and backing of him, of no acceptance to any of the sick thoughts he let himself concoct.

“I don’t recall granting you permission for this, I don’t recall ever wanting you and I assure you Feliciano has no similar wants,” she scolded, pushing him away, all watching one of those rare moments that Khaos let himself trip, panic and even move back as he shook his arm trying to relieve himself from the heat, the pain, letting his mind begin a healing in the area.

Augusta, in the guise of Feliciano, stood yet as unaffected, no kind of reaction to the small hurt she caused on the powerful man.

“How did you get in? Why are you here?” He was losing his patience, growls beginning and anger slowly replacing whatever lust was there earlier.

“I created this field, I can grant myself whatever entrance and exit I want, it’s as simple as creating enough of an opening,” she explained easily.

Khaos sent glances to some of his men, who nodded and began marching away, surely to grant themselves an escape for his mission. Augusta could have added that she closed up her entrance just for this to not happen, but she refused to give the energy, they could disappoint and later kill themselves as they tried to escape the new potency of the field which now had newer Ace magic. She only rolled her eyes and settled on him again, wanting to continue his questions.

“As for my visit, I come reclaiming something back before you taint it more in your horrible magic,” she assured and demanded.

“What is it that you’re asking?”

“That you return to my grandson his beloved, his king, I will not let him remain here, I will not let you place a finger on him and intensify to the worst of your own,” she growled, she practically shouted as she wanted to make her decree sure, for once enough to have Ludwig suddenly stopping, a widened that showed through the rest of his body.

“Oh, you mean Ludwig over there,” Khaos pointed to him as if he was an useless item.

“Yes, at once, and we’ll be leaving instantly.”

The crowds awaited for Khaos’s answer, which he postponed to worsen the agitation, even the menace that grew from Feliciano’s body.

“I cannot do that,” he assured, instantly fuelling the fires of Augusta’s anger.

“Why?” Her tone harshened, with a monstrous growl that made some of the men quiver in fear, parting more from her side, for they felt the heat strong, ready to burn them.

“He came here on his own free will, it’s only what he wanted and I am going to give him. With him here earlier than I had expected means that I can strengthen him to what I want, make him a more powerful pawn. I can’t let go of that, now that it’s already here with a year anticipation.”

It caused Ludwig to fight on more on his side. He still desired to hurt him good, he still wanted to punch him bad.

“And I will not permit it!” Augusta determined, taking steps closer to him, with points and harshened steps that threatened to break the stone under her.

“I want him to leave with me right now,” she shadowed, she continued to demand with fury and Khaos was not letting himself fall under it, turn weak, indifference in his eyes, checking his nails, even his wrist, admiring the dark jeweled bracelet he wore.

“I still won’t, my dear.”

That did it.

She forced in a slam of Feliciano’s foot to the ground, creating a shaking throughout the whole building, rocks falling, crashes of pillars resounding across the halls, creating worsened shouts and for the men to scurry in fear. Fire began to alight around the room, brightening, burning, some even fell to its clutches, filling the room in shouts and the smell of melting flesh. The jets continued to grow, some fires reaching as high as the dome above them, not a part hidden from her red, nobody saved from sweating, from the light of intensity that had many covering their eyes. Yet Khaos sat as nonchalant, not in the lease disturb, only continuing his angry glares with Augusta, the occurrences around them doing nothing to interrupt them.

“You cannot defeat me right now and I have more than enough power and men to stop you if you dare to escape,” he reminded with a growl, with anger slowly releasing.

“But I can make you pain.” She brought Feliciano’s hand forward, piercing right through his chest with the same fires, the same burning and for once did Khaos let himself squirm, to fall out of breath, shout, trying to release himself by scratching tightly to Feliciano’s arm, but even still Augusta continued her hurt, the scratching and destroying of the insides of this vessel, of one of his priced robes, weakening enough for his efforts to do nothing.

Despite the cringing, his trying for a release, the words Augusta wanted to hear refused to leave his mouth, he still managed a glare, even through the sweating, the greeted teeth, even the blood and burn that oozed down his body, tainting Feliciano’s arm.

“Nothing,” he managed to growl out, “all this will do is just ruin the vessel and weaken your own. You’re only wasting your magic. Our true battle will take place in the next alignment, not inside the field, the very force would not permit our magic to extend to those of killing, because if not, believe me so I would have ridden of all of you easily.” He spat confidently, tiring yet maintaining his fortitude, his resolve, one Augusta was starting to see clear much to her disappointment…it meant she had to go along with other plans, admitting to the right of some of his words.

The fires dispersed, she let Feliciano release the hands from the bloodied hole she created, letting Khaos finally breathe what he could as his vessel began its own healing. Feliciano’s hand was now dirtied, Augusta examining it before she cleaned it off in an easy control, as clean without the proof of the small moment of violence she had just created.

“Very well then,” she accepted, walking away, many for a moment thinking that she would just leave, right out through the entrance she had so easily taken. Then again…would she be willing to leave behind Ludwig with Khaos?

Instead of the exit, she came forward to the group that still held on to Ludwig, frightened of her to the point that they let go of the prince, confident that the shadow restraint Khaos placed would be enough. With a single pointing of her power he was released, able to move, to breathe properly, to stare to the figure of his beloved as astounded, knowing that at the moment it was Augusta he should respect. To show this he bowed, the lowest he could, practically hiding his face. Augusta would not permit it, setting Feliciano’s hands on his shoulders to raise him. She sent him a respectful gleam and a smile, an assurance of friends.

“I shall remain here as well then,” she decided, earning a collective gasp from all in the room, even Ludwig, who instantly was ready to refuse if Augusta hadn’t raised a finger silencing him. Even Khaos’s expression was that of surprise, staring on and wondering if he had really heard her acceptance to stay, to drag in Feliciano as well.

“You wouldn’t dare,” Khaos challenged.

“All I’ve ever done is dare you, so yes, I shall remain, unless you let us leave,” she assured, hoping it could test him some more, but Khaos only glared, resting on his throne in acceptance, even if angered.

“All right, it will bound to make things interesting until the alignment. Welcome then, my dear,” he smiled sinisterly, surely ideas that Augusta had to calm Feliciano about in her mind, assuring him with ideas and ways for him to stand brave for their second plan.

“I’m doing this as a way to watch over Ludwig, to make sure you do nothing to him,” she glared on, brushing some dust of Ludwig’s pristine white suit, if still some parts ruined with cuts and blood stains because of his earlier fight with Khaos’s men.

Khaos chuckled, all a joke to him, a show. “I believe it’s better. I can watch over you and Feliciano as well, and hey, perhaps Ludwig can rid of you quicker here,” Khaos delighted at the thought, smiling splendidly with expectation.

Augusta decided to ignore and roll her eyes, focusing once again on Ludwig…or was she? There was a deepening in her eyes, a loving intent, her hands caressing way too intimately his face, finding, searching, a hopeful smile that Ludwig couldn’t help grinning back to. He had to remind himself that he held that spirit of Romulus that she so desired and hoped was still out there, and to know he was inside him, her own grandson’s beloved, her dear friend Soren’s own great grandson. It was a wonderful meeting that left her glowing, with greetings to a past and with hope for an amazing future. Then she took notice of Ludwig as he was, away from the meanings he held in his soul. He was as handsome as Soren had been at his age, strong, kindness in his eyes…even fear with the occurrences going on around them, yet brave, determined, obsolete and forward. Soren’s lineage created an amazing king, a perfect companion for his own Feliciano, with just the heart to be a Queen.

“Are you going to stay like this?” Keron wondered to many things, one being her commanding of Feliciano’s body and the very scene before him that disgusted, bringing

annoyance to his expression.

“No…but don’t you dare think I won’t be watching, don’t you dare try a thing against Ludwig or Feliciano, or you will suffer more of my fury. Even if I can’t kill you I will try anything that will make you cringe as you just did, and trust me, Keron, I can find new ways.”

Khaos had to try really hard to hide his shiver.

“That’s my last warning and offer, head to them and we will later see how our next facing will go.” She gave him one final glare before she turned completely to Ludwig.

“So be it,” he nodded, but yet other plans settled in his mind.

Augusta extended her hands and gave one last dear caress to Ludwig’s jaw, one last look and longing before she brought Feliciano’s body closer, to lay in the comfort of his shoulder, enough for a sweetness many simply thought of as an exaggerated display, but Augusta used it as a disguise.

“Do not worry, I have given Feliciano a plan, he shall explain everything later in private,” were her last words before she began her leave, her return to Feliciano’s inner soul, giving him his reign back, his weakness, his haze, dizziness, quickly stumbling in Ludwig’s hold. Feliciano groaned, his head panging deeply, trying to regain order, movement, even a proper stand as his surroundings continued to spin. Ludwig held to him immediately, his grip strong, arms around him, raising his head to him as a sort of comfort.

“Ludwig…Ludwig!” Feliciano exclaimed in sudden glowing joy, jumping and wrapping his arms around him in the same love, in the same lost of each other, giving them a small moment of peace, of relief, of coming back to each other, Feliciano truly as he was.

Surprisingly none of the men around them did anything to stop this, confused, questioning, hoping for some kind of command by Khaos, but for now he stared on to this with continuing annoyance, rolling his eyes, then wanting to be immediate in his next orders.

“Take Ludwig to one of the furnished prisoner rooms,” he suddenly commanded, force in his voice like a snap, enough for the men to fall back into action.

“What?” Feliciano questioned as he gave a moment to turn away, just the distraction for the man to take as a holding, pulling the lovers away, instant disagreement in their shouts, in their kicks and pushes.

“You gave your word not to do anything to us,” Feliciano managed to shout, just as Ludwig was once again tied in shadows, double on his chest and hips, around his mouth, neck and now even hands. It drove Feliciano to act more, to try his own punch and kicks despite his weakness, his missing throws and how it hurt him when he did collide with another body.

“Oh how cute, you do have bite, interesting.” Khaos smirked, with his ever elegance coming closer. He didn’t put any binding on Feliciano, his men took easy control of his body, his

magic too weak, the very binding of the field, enough for both the intruders to fall into silence, to listen to the king.

“I said Ludwig would be taken to a prisoner room, much more decent than the cellar I had in mind. He can rest and be comfortable, much to my disappointment. Now as for you, my dear.” He brought himself closer to the arising Queen, his brown eyes with his own shake, fear, growing tears, truly his emotion, his terror. To worsen it, Khaos brought a hand to take his chin, turning it as he pleased to admired the lovely form of this new coming queen’s face, very similar to how Augusta’s had been, with the rose of her cheeks, her luscious lips and the soft curls. He had to make use of it, a sicken smile on his lips again, many alarms going through Feliciano’s entire being.

“Take his highness to the Queen’s room, only fitting. Let him be attended well, I shall invite him to dinner tomorrow," he expected, delighted, a smile that any host could hold, but it didn’t fit with the fact that it was Khaos, that this was the dark castle inside the field, both the only Hearts, no moment giving calm to Feliciano to think that Khaos could be kind and forgiven now.

“Take them away,” he commanded lastly before he turned away to other halls, to other matters, the swoon of his robes like an erase to keep them behind, uncaring to the continued fights the two made as they were beginning to be moved away.

“Ludwig! Ludwig!” Feliciano managed to constantly call out to him, trying to find escape, hoping the reach of his hand could do something to bring him close once again.

Before he knew it, doors were shut in his face and he was taken elsewhere.

Chapter 49

Chapter Notes

> Things are still a mess, I went through quite an adventure just to get signal to be able to post this. Despite everything, me and my family are doing all right. We have a generator and I'm allowed to write an hour a day in now my aunt's computer, but sometimes it's really hard to do so with different situations going on. I will still continue to be on hiatus until things are stable. I'm managing to write how I can, I already started work on the next chapter but I won't be able to post something anytime soon because of the emergency. An hour is not enough to finish an entire chapter for a week. As always, patience, hope, as well as help, please check this page to help me with my move: https://www.fundmytravel.com/campaign/0P1dsy0SI2 With the situation, it's harder than ever to get money. Any little thing is enough and I will be doing some videos in thanks, if not, sharing the link would be more than enough, thank you! I hope you enjoy this chapter and I hope that you can wait enough for the next.

He was shoved and thrown inside his room in a stumble that dropped him harshly to the floor of the shining tiled floors. The men showed no concern or help, they quickly shut the door behind him and left him to whatever, the bang of the doors a haunting echo, assuring the cage, the lock, the loneliness the arising queen found himself in. The room looked rich, with tapestries, paintings, relics, a large bed with pillows and blankets, curtains of silk, cleaned and large to the proper accommodation of any kind of royal. It was rather surprising after that walk through halls of ruin, darkness and abandon.

He could stand here by himself now, inspecting, untrusting, careful in every step, every breath, testing even the air with each approach around the room. Once he could see that there was no trap, no hidden figure or awaiting kill, he hurried seeing what kind of sudden escape he could be offered. The entrance door was locked, the only two other available rooms a bathroom and another locked door that refused whatever pulling or pushing Feliciano tried. He took a glance out the window and opened, only surrounded by dark hills in an eternal blizzard, the wind blowing as harshly as ever, looking down to see a height that will prove fatal if he dropped. He closed the panes and settled with excluding the idea of escaping through this window, but not seizing any other thoughts that could help. He searched for any kind of information through cabinets, shelves, even under rugs or behind tapestries. When nothing turned out, he gave up by laying upon the singular bed, which he had to admit was quite comfortable, a sinking of softness that he did not expect in this castle. Yet it wasn't truly relieving, it wasn't rest, his mind still wondered and worried deeply over Ludwig, holding tightly to the blankets as he tried to keep himself from imagining the worst, wishing deeply for him, for a kind of sign that could lead him to his security. He decided that he should instead focus on finding where they keep Ludwig, go along with Augusta's plan and find that library, tell Ludwig what she gave him and hopefully they can find their exit in the least three

days' time. In those thoughts he let himself drift throughout the day, night and even the next day, until he received quite a gentle knock on his door for the night, a scared servant surely.

"Our king commands for you to join him in his dinner," he said and Feliciano held a great temptation to refuse, but he then realized that this could be his chance to roam the castle as he wanted, a chance to later find his detour to the place of his true wish. With a defeated sigh he accepted to doing this if he wanted Augusta's plan to work, so he eased his breaths as he changed, to a covering white robe that did well in hiding his form, as well as hiding the glow of his face to nothing of impression. He did not want the wrong attention coming from Khaos.

He was brought forward to a large dining room, the typical of royal feasting, accommodated as it was to receive hundreds of guests, with food piling, even empty plates, cutlery and napkin for every empty table. At the very end sat King Khaos, smiling, a handsome robe that he wore in specification, for impression, for a desire, but all he got was the other's trembling, question and surely fear, hesitant to make any deeper moves into the room.

"Sit, sit, sit," he insisted in quite a friendly manner, pointing to the chair at his first left, but Feliciano refused it, instead picking the one at the very end opposite of him, eyes remaining on his empty plate, accommodating and making sure to Khaos his choice of wanting to be away from him as far as possible at the moment. Khaos was clearly annoyed, trying to hide it by giving attention to his wine glass, drinking, landing it rather harshly on the surface of the table.

"I have no intention of hurting you right now, it is not yet the time," Khaos tried to ease, but Feliciano made his uncomfort clear, his eyes avoidant, hands shaking under the shadow of the table.

"I would rather stay here," Feliciano determined, for once meeting Khaos's dark eyes to assure him, seeing them anger and mystify in evil to Feliciano's refusal of him.

"Very well, we shall eat then. Please, pick from whatever you like." With a simple motion of his hands, all the offered plates flew on to Feliciano's closeness, an array of different kinds of things that truly made Feliciano's mouth water.

Tzatziki with chips, shrimp, roasted turkey, wraps, almond cookies and Ice cream. It was becoming really hard for Feliciano to just sit there without having a hand reach for his picking. Once he had a covering of all his plates, Khaos brought back them back to their normal settling, letting himself just watch how Feliciano gazed to his served food warily, poking with his fork, surely expecting some kind of wrong doing.

"They aren't poisoned if that's what you're wondering." He began taking his own bites, relaxed with the richness of the dip, licking his fingers in quite the normality, like any kind of friend in a dinner visit.

After Feliciano took his first bite from the shrimp, with no kind of ailments but actual good taste on his tongue, did he continue, the situation showing to him how hungry he had been, quickly ravaging to the point that Khaos had to fly him more plates to take new pickings. It was as he tried the turkey that Feliciano thought about how Ludwig would like it, settling the

strong reminders, the missing, the holding as if trying to get back his warmth and presence, especially with such close evil lurkings.

“Where’s Ludwig?” He suddenly asked with childish fear, gazing above the room for him, wanting to hope that he just hadn’t noticed him taking sitting along with them, hiding behind the piles of food or some excessive decoration. No, he would have noticed quickly no matter the obstacle, Khaos would have made a comment. They were truly the only two there.

“In the room I had assigned for him of course, I had the servants bring him food so we could focus on being with ourselves,” he smiled in expectance, as if Feliciano could dare accept to this so easily, pushed away from his beloved and letting this fiend think that he could be so easily tampered as to betray him.

“Why would you want that? I clearly do not want any kind of interaction with you. We’re set to battle for the next alignment and I just want to be with Ludwig right now,” Feliciano tried to beg, but Khaos smirked, letting himself lean against the hold on his hands, teasing.

“Do you really? From what I heard you tried to avoid him as much as you could. The reports weren’t saying anything friendly going on between you two and you even refused his proposal,” he laughed.

“Because of threats like you! Trying to protect me! Trying what he could for me! I…I didn’t know!” Feliciano defended, gripping harshly on the fabric of his robe on his lap, trying to control any kind emotion that would show more of his misery.

“Did he really had to act out so harshly?”

“It was the best option, and even so his feelings would escape from time to time, especially in this journey. They poured like they had never done and it had proved to me enough his dedication and love,” he tried to alight even if the memories still hurt, even after Ludwig had revealed his reason.

“And after everything you actually still love him? You are truly Augusta’s great grandson, with just her useless fantasies and hopes,” he rolled his eyes as he took another sip of his wine. “And yet you refuse to give me the same hopes and chances. Who knows, perhaps I can prove better than whatever your arising king refused to offer you.” He dared smirk, he dared believed, and Feliciano angered in the very fires that Augusta had made him feel when she faced her past husband for him.

“Ludwig was always loyal to his position as coming king, hardworking, powerful and also kind to others even if he had to refuse himself like this to me. He was never spiteful to anybody and never misused his power. Those moments he did show his love…where meaningful, strong and just enough to keep my feelings for him solid,” Feliciano made sure, he defended in a spite he never thought he could utter. “No story, not even after I found out your truth, was enough to prove me of any kind of mercy and righteousness from you…you deserve no kind of chance or hope.” Even in the strength of his words Feliciano trembled, shivering, fearing a kind of slash coming forward to him for his rashness.

Khaos kept on smiling and it only helped to instill more fear, to coward back into his chair, losing all kind of appetite in finishing his ice cream.

“And darling I wouldn’t want it any other way,” he was proud, showing a devilish smirk with teeth that looked hungry and ready to bite.

“Then don’t expect any kind of obedience and adoration from me,” Feliciano still defended, even as a gulp escaped and as surely he let himself coat in worrying sweat, intensifying as Khaos took a standing.

“Oh Feliciano, there’s a year left for the alignment, of being bored, of having no one but me, and with the kindness I read from you, I’m sure you’ll give me a gracious opening and I’ll make good use of it when it’s done,” he smiled in a such a sickened way that made Feliciano want to stand and hurry out of there.

“I won’t let you,” Feliciano still assured even in the shaking.

“I’ll make it possible, I’ll create whatever atmosphere and chance. I have power, I have all the rooms of the castle, I can keep Ludwig however I want and he doesn’t need to find out if you don’t want to. Come on, make it easier, either way I’ll have you begging for me in no time.” He came closer, suddenly smashing his hand against the table to assure him and Feliciano stood in a flash, angering, tear stained, raising a hand in fierce fire, glowing harshly and just enough of a heat to have Khaos stopping, enough of a warning to not mess, to not continue.

“Don’t. You. Dare.” He threatened, and even with the tears falling Khaos could see enough menace, enough potent that wasn’t wise to mess with. “I am not as lowly as you,” Feliciano barked, managing strength and perseverance of his magic, expectant of an Ace.

Khaos groaned and moved back, granting their earlier distance, taking his sitting and yet Feliciano lost any kind of tranquility to be able to sit back in his chair.

“You’re much harder than what I expected, but none the less I won’t stop my trying, there will be several other dinners of course,” he smiled, still in sickened hope.

Feliciano wanted to get out, he wanted to get out!

“Other times, other places, I’ll get to you soon enough.” No doubt was shown in him, he continued to grin, giddy and excited in a way that made Feliciano want to destroy it.

How mean, how harshened this Khaos made him. It was unsightly for someone of his usual sunshine glow.

“Angela!” Khaos suddenly called and in an instant his faithful servant made her entrance, with her bow and empty stare. “Escort Feliciano back to his room, we’re done for the night.”

“Yes, your majesty,” she obeyed, quite kindly offering space and time for Feliciano to follow her.

Feliciano took no delay, he hurriedly left behind her, quite a breath being released from him the moment he came into the ruined halls, walking close to this woman, hands on his chest as a sort of protection from whatever could be around in these cursed corridors. He expected to be granted freeway through the halls as soon as the dinner ended, but of course Khaos had no kind of trust with what he could do with his freedom. Of course he would be watched, guided, all kinds of eyes on him to avoid any kind of release. Yet Feliciano tried, gazing about to the new halls that passed by his left and right, into the maze of this palace, of its mysteries, it's hiding. If only he could find an escape through them that could grant him that chance to see it all, to find Ludwig. Oh Ludwig, Ludwig… the grasp of his hands turned tighter on his chest in his worry, in his call for him, in the need of his comfort, light, trust and love. After dealing with Khaos's such cruel advances, it made how Ludwig acted noble. As his eyes searched, his eyes then landed on the figure of this woman, Angela as Khaos had called her, walking straight on without a care to her surroundings and the occurrences. Feliciano noticed how thin she was, weak, like a simple breeze would be enough to blow her apart.

"Have you eaten?" Feliciano found himself wondering, truly worried for her, such care quite startling to her, confusing, no words to reply to this kind of question. They left the halls in quite the silence as she thought of the proper words, stuttering and thinking if she was perhaps going against some untold orders.

"No-no, we're only allowed to eat if our king decides to."

"What?" Feliciano was in indignation, a new kind of anger surging through him. "That is incredibly mean and absurd. He can't leave his own servants going hungry!"

"He-he told us it's our duty as servants."

"And as servants you should be well fed and cared for to give proper work for your rulers."

"We-we…we do just enough as we are…"

"I can't leave you like this!" Feliciano would not permit it any longer, advancing, coming close to her side. "Where is the kitchen?"

"The-the kitchen?"

"Yes, the kitchen, you have to get something to eat!"

"No-no, I'm not permitted to unless our King commands us to, I could get-"

"Come on!" He took a grasp of her arm and lead her forward through other halls, back, in a scheme similar to how the kitchen was in his own castle, hoping it could be similar here. "Where is it?" He commanded in a force that reminded himself of his grandfather.

"It's…It's…" she still hesitated, but as another pang of hunger went through her, as she was already at his easy mercy, she let herself be taken. "Continue down this hall, then take the first stairs downward to your left, it's at the end through the double doors."

Feliciano followed her instruction, moving them quickly in the quite surprisingly empty halls, until they entered, hiding between racks of pots and pans as cooks did their usual in cleaning and preparing for their leave and closing. They remained hidden until they both made sure that all had left, leaving the kitchen in utter darkness, Feliciano using a simple fire spell to light up the room, gazing about to have an idea of where they kept certain foods. He spotted some of the leftover wraps, kept in a crystal covered plate, leading them both forward, opening and quickly offering to Angela, who devoured, the first wrap gone in a matter of seconds. Feliciano decided he would find her more food as he handed two more wraps and as he found different ingredients and where different utensils lay. He simply began cooking what he could in the best silence he could utter. By the end, he had made Angela some small sandwiches, fish, a special salad, Amaretto cookies and handed her some of the left-over ice cream. He made sure she had as much as she needed and wanted, taking sitting beside her as he settled on having some hot chocolate he had made for himself last minute.

“Let me know if you ever feel hungry again, we’ll sneak in like we did and I’ll have no problem cooking for you,” he offered, relishing in his sips, for once smiling his usual self in this dreaded place.

She nodded, too distracted in her bites, in her filling to utter a word. It wasn’t until she finished all, now on her ice cream, slow and now enjoying in a moment of peace and sweetness, did she utter her words. “Th-thank you…thank you so much, it was all delicious. Never in my years have I been offered something like this and never did I expect I would receive such treatments from you…you are truly kinder than what the reports were saying,” she admitted, with such a glow, color and vibrancy that was odd for someone who was a dark creation of Khaos.

“You deserve this after having to put up with Khaos, after all the kinds of hardships he surely put you through,” he told her, placing gentle hands on her arm, which caused her to smile and feel confidence.

“Your stay will surely make it more bearable,” she confided, brightening and Feliciano even shook her hands as a promise to help her how he could.

Afterwards they settled on finishing and cleaning everything to not leave a trace of their presence, just the time to have Angela thinking, of wanting to show her gratitude somehow, something she knew that the arising queen would want.

“I want to repay this,” she braved enough to say as they exited, as she took a new kind of leading, surely of plans of heading elsewhere. “You want to see your king, don’t you?” She guessed as much, especially after their kind of embrace the last time she saw them together.

“Oh yes…Oh yes! Yes! Yes! Please! Can you take me to him?” Feliciano let himself become desperate, holding to her arm to make this decision sure, to make this leading definite.

“It’s the least I can do, but…you have to promise to not say a word that it was I who brought you and we have to be as hidden as possible, the threats that could come to both of us are large.”

Feliciano nodded and accepted, that moment taking deepening staircases remaining silent, even letting his body fall to that command, keeping a tight hold to Angela as if that of trusting friends, both taking easy steps and precautionary eyes.

The quarters where Ludwig was surely kept were tight, of old stone dark walls, yet somehow warm with the torches that alighted at the side of every door present. Surprisingly there were no soldiers, or guards, or even other inhabitants, no snores or movements as Feliciano watched over every small window that showed from the door. Of course, he questioned the vacancy, something that he didn't need to word for Angela to know.

"Our King is confident in the castle's own guarding system, as well as his own power to defend. He rather keep his men fighting or attacking outside the field than remain here and watch over a prisoner prince he's confident cannot do a thing to escape or won't be enough to overpower him."

It was a relief to Feliciano, giving him breath as they now moved freer through the halls, until they reached a deep end, a singular hall that Feliciano would have surely missed if it wasn't for Angela's pull. She made sure no other was in the adjoining rooms and made sure that Ludwig was in the one Khaos had assigned. Once she saw him there, sitting upon the bed, his hands scratching at a small kitty-like winged lion who purred at his touch, she conjured a set of keys under her sleeve, unlocking, many sounds that alerted Ludwig to a standing and a defense. Angela opened the door wide and gave Feliciano immediate showing, who instantly smiled, his whole body seeming to jump even if he couldn't to avoid sounds of discovery, smiling, eyes glowing with a sun that was enough of a potency to bring the same smile to Ludwig, relief, welcome, one he could show without a care after their truth admitted in the divide of the field. They came to a more secure crash, of nothing to separate, of for once by themselves and truly bathing in this glory of together.

"Feli-Feliciano, what are you doing here? How did you get here?" Ludwig took the chance to separate and check him over, inspecting arms, hands, body, even every curl on his hair down to his most specialist one.

"I'm fine Ludwig, I didn't let Khaos for a moment touch me." To assure him, he took his hands, letting them caress at the side of his face, the same pure softness that showed no other kind of battle or strain. "Angela, one of Khaos's main servants, took me here!" He announced, pointing to her, still standing by the door. She waved sheepishly, beginning to fear the intense blue eyes that the prince of Hearts gave her. "I helped her, so she decided to help me, and she took me to see you because I really wanted to see if you were all right." Any deepening look of their eyes was interrupted by Pookie, flying in between with his own excitement to see his master. "Pookie!" Feliciano shouted in delight, taking the little St. Mark to his embrace, cuddling and noosing. "I was wondering what happened to you."

"He stayed with me afterwards, he missed you deeply…as did I…" he admitted with a very shy blush that made Feliciano smile, confident, closeness, wanting to show love, devotion, leaning, a closing of lips that seemed for a moment sure.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but your highness, if you're planning to leave, we must immediately-"

"I won't go."

“Huh?”

“I’ll be staying here for the night, if I may. I really do not want to leave them alone and I don’t want to return to that bleak room,” he decided.

Silence as Angela thought it over, planning, sincere with the begging look in Feliciano’s eyes to accept. “All right, you may stay for the night, but I’ll be coming early in the morning. Servants would be expecting you in your room for your next Khaos meeting.”

Both the Heartian’s faces soured, Feliciano giving a leaning into Ludwig’s chest, Ludwig wrapping his arms around him as if to avoid any kind of closeness that could bring Feliciano to those dangers of Khaos.

“Okay,” Feliciano accepted meekly, for at least he would have the nights with Ludwig.

Angela then closed the door on them, locking as she usually did, a smile of luck and happiness to Feliciano before she settled off, for once truly leaving them alone. Once again they focused on just being in their arms, of their scents, threading and intensification of their leaning, until the silence was too much, until there were reminders and concerns.

“Why did Augusta made you come here? She told me you had a plan from her,” Ludwig reminded, maintaining at least the hold of his hand, leading him to sit on the bed that was too small for Ludwig’s figure.

“She does, she saw me suffer too much for you and she couldn’t let it be, she thought this was the best she could offer…as well as we needed to,” Feliciano explained, making himself comfortable, not for a moment letting free any touch of Ludwig.

“Needed to? What could be the purpose of letting you come in here with Khaos? It should be a burden only for myself.” How he cursed the seed Khaos had planted in him through Romulus.

“To protect you! To save you!” Feliciano pleaded for Ludwig to understand, letting his hand caress at his face. “There’s something here in the field, a library, books all about the universe, about the origin of Pisa and Khaos’s powers, about Ace power and even about generational passages of power, like I have, like you. Augusta told me that I can find books there that can help me control and learn about my Ace power, as well as something to can surely help and get rid of what Khaos has in you.”

“A library?” Ludwig perked.

“Yes! It’s dire we find it. Augusta told me of a plan of escape, but before anything we have to get these books.”

Ludwig remained pensive, trying to find any hint of such a room through the talks of the men, spoken in a language he couldn’t understand, thinking of the halls or doors he passed, but nothing gave enough of a clue.

“How are you planning on finding it?”

Feliciano was scared to answer, Ludwig could feel the tensing in his hands. “I could ask Angela or…I can coax Khaos to tell me.”

All kinds of alarms resounded in Ludwig’s head at the mentioning.

“How exactly do you think he will tell you?”

“He looks at me weirdly…” Feliciano got shivers being reminded of it, “and you have to remember that Augusta was once his wife, he…wants me as he did her.” The grip he had of Ludwig tightened, he could feel his vengeance, his fear, his intensity for protection.

Feliciano feared continuing but he had to let him know. “I’ll…give him enough of an opening for him to feel confident in telling me, I don’t think it would be that hard. As soon as I know I’ll come tell you and we can both go to the library together.”

Yet Ludwig did not show any kind of relief, he was still thinking of what Khaos could do if Feliciano didn’t control well enough what he did as an opening, letting his thumbs rub at his hands, showing enough concern that made Feliciano smile, adoring how Ludwig was easily letting himself show now.

“Don’t worry…it won’t involve him getting too close. I won’t let him place any kind of finger on me if I can,” Feliciano made sure, such dedication that Ludwig saw it true despite his fears.

“Did Augusta tell you how many books we should bring?”

“The most important ones. If we want to bring any others then it’s in our decision, but the less the better. We have to make quite a run after we get them.”

“What exactly is this plan of escape?”

“Augusta told me that this castle is the ruins of the old one Khaos used to hold in the heavens, she thinks much of the halls and rooms have remained with some few exceptions. She really hopes the secret passageways didn’t change, some that she created herself back when she was locked in his marriage. One should lead us out of the castle unnoticed, but we have to be quick in reaching the outer field, we can easily be spotted and have Khaos and his men chasing us.” Feliciano was already nervous, a shake that Ludwig tried to calm by placing both his hands on his, raising them and placing on them a kiss, so sweet, so full, Feliciano’s eyes watered with joyful tears.

“We’ll manage.”

This was the union he dreamed of having with Ludwig, despite being stuck in this dark castle with such a high menace above them. This was enough of a light, this was enough of a calm to bring them into rest together, sharing the limited space of the bed how they could in their tangled arms and legs, in last kisses against their heads before they settled for once in a night of union, reminder of their childhood, reminder of a new grown chance between them that was bound to start from now.

Chapter 50

Chapter Notes

> I've had this chapter done for a week, but it is only now that I managed to find a computer (one of the few working ones in the university) to actually post. There's still no electricity where I live, no signal and water is limited…we might not have most of these until December (And sometimes I think February). My time to write is still very limited and worst when classes started as well as dealing with matters about my move. Still on hiatus, but I do try to write when I can, just continue to be patient. For those who read The Society of Romulus and Remus and Good Luck Friedrich, I am also in the process of working on the next chapters for them so expect it soon. Hope you enjoy!

What a bliss that innocent night had been, what a rest, what a waking, what a meet of shinning eyes and smiles, even if the darkened brick around them, even if the raging blizzard outside, even if in Khaos's castle. All that could be ignored, all that can be forgotten when Feliciano could freely let his fingers linger all throughout Ludwig's face, when Ludwig could thread his own over Feliciano's arms, their legs still between each other, chatting, laughing as if they could be in some kind of normality back in Berlin or even in Barga.

"Are you still using those shampoos Mrs. Palmieri made," Ludwig chuckled against his hair, taking that very familiar scent that had remained just the same as it had been in their childhood.

"I can't possibly use any other, none can treat my curls as well. I had her give me an entire box of her bottles before leaving to Berlin," Feliciano smiled, finding safety in the crook of Ludwig's neck.

"The scent fits you really well, plus your hair is still as soft," he complimented in earnest.

Feliciano giggled and wrapped his arms strongly around his neck, letting him have as much of his hair as he wanted.

"When we return to Berlin-" he still hoped, he still believed- "we'll be staying at Barga on our way, I can have her make you some as well," he chuckled, letting his fingers trace his lips.

Ludwig pondered it, before revealing in a smile his acceptance. "How many scents does she have available?"

"You don't have to worry about that. Mrs. Palmieri has several, she even has strawberry milkshake."

They laughed, wondering how it would seem on Ludwig, joking as things as having Birds flying above his hair trying to take a picking from whatever fruits they thought would be there. One of their fits was interrupted by a quickened knock, having them both sit instantly, with a still secure hold that didn't let them leave.

"Your highness, King Khaos and the servants will soon check on you, we have to get going." There was great urgency in Angela's voice, one Feliciano knew needed to have immediate heading, no matter the regret in his eyes or how he had slowly released himself from Ludwig, already slumping him into his despairs.

"I'll do whatever I can to come here tonight," Feliciano promised as he stood, stretching and riding of any wronged fold in his clothes.

Ludwig could only sit, taking Feliciano's hands, giving him one last grasp of himself and an assurance. "If not, I completely understand. Don't fret so much, I want you to be safe more than anything."

Feliciano smiled and nodded in acceptance to his words, giving him one last kiss upon his forehead before settling off, the touch upon the door the signal enough for Angela to omit the keys and give him exit. A last wave and the sun disappeared once again from the room, Pookie giving a meow of miss, extending his paw wanting to have him back. Ludwig petted him, with just the calm he needed himself.

Back to that room of darkness, even with riches, even with slight colors, even with the largeness and the views. It was gloom, it was death, Feliciano could feel constant shivering that had him holding to himself, trying to call out for Augusta within himself as some leaning. Nothing, nothing of her as he had felt before. He sighed and settled off to the bed to try and find some rest before whatever Khaos would ask of him. As he came to that reach, there was a sudden knock that interrupted. Without waiting for his permission, a group of servants made their way inside, stopping in a perfect align to give him a bow to then place the clothes they had brought over one of the near low tables, each by turn leaving the room until Feliciano had the room for himself once again. Hesitant, he made his way to the presented robes and could already feel himself be driven by disgust. All of them were the dark of Khaos's reign, some tight enough to reveal much of his form, others his own Ace power, as well as others that would reveal too much of his skin, a couple of reds to go along with him and so he knew they were made with himself in mind. Feliciano recoiled, afraid of them as if the king himself was there mocking him, forcing the wear on him. He looked upon his own white robe, still clean, still with Ludwig's lingering warmth and declared that it was good enough to use, decided, sending glares to what he had brought.

That afternoon he was asked to join Khaos in one of his study rooms. He was going through some plans of attack he had made with his men's last mission, adding and fixing, ruin that would surely bring devastation to Feliciano's people if it worked. Khaos dared to do this while the very arising queen of Hearts was sitting in the very room, taking seating as far from his desk, close to the door, to take his immediate exit as soon as Khaos decreed it. Feliciano could see hinted anger in his eyes once he saw him in the same robe from the day before, clearly showing a disobedience and disapproval in wearing the sickness he had given him. He

didn't mention it, he went on chatting about the strength of his men, their cunning and the power he had given them. Feliciano wanted to mention that if it had all been true, then they wouldn't have escaped or defeated them as they had done many times, as the very kingdoms subdue them and claimed their victory, but he remained silent, only sending daggers with his eyes, weak ones, none capable of his sweetness, which only made Khaos smile and Feliciano more fearful.

He was told he would have dinner in his own room for the night, just as Angela came picking him up to take him once again there. On their way, she promised that once he was done eating, she would take him to Ludwig for the night. In the silence that later continued, Feliciano found himself thinking about the books that were in Khaos's study, useless ones surely, perhaps records or information about the kingdoms he already knew about. If they held any real importance, perhaps he would have felt Augusta nudge at him somehow from within. He gazed to Angela before him, who he supposedly knew as Khaos's must trusted servant. Perhaps she knew, perhaps she could help.

"Are there any libraries here?" He asked, trying to sound as if it was a mere curiosity for leisure.

"Technically three if you count the study room. There's another one quite close to your room, mostly full of stories and novels, and then there's the king's private one."

It had to be.

"Do you know where that private one is?"

"No. The king doesn't allow anyone to go there, something about what Augusta had done long ago," she informed easily.

"Any hints, any ideas to where though?" He still wondered.

"None, he doesn't even talk about it unless he pays it a visit. Whenever he does he locks himself in his room, so surely he has an opening from there," she guessed as much, which gave enough of an idea for Feliciano to pin point.

As scheduled, he had a dinner of ginger noodles, loaf, ricotta, and biscuits, as rich, as fresh as anything he would have in any castle, making Feliciano wonder for a moment what kind of growing or casting the castle was doing to get these ingredients like those of any kingdom. Once he had shown to be done, Angela took him once again to the deepened rooms where Ludwig was imprisoned, both coming to the usual embraces of miss. Angela left them to their privacy and as soon as her footsteps died across the hall, Feliciano removed from the embrace to speak what he had found out.

"Angela doesn't know where it is, but she has an idea that it might be somewhere hidden in his room."

"His room?" Ludwig seemed insulted, mostly thinking of where Feliciano would have to go, where he could convince and how in such a private room. Feliciano had to shush him, for an angry fire started to burn in Ludwig's eyes, along with strength and a harshened grip.

“I told you I can manage it."

“Feliciano, it’s his room, who knows what kind of spells are there, what he could do to-”

Feliciano had to lay a finger upon his lips to shush him. “Just…trust me."

“It’s not that I don’t, I’m worried he would lay a single finger on you and I wouldn’t be there to stop it. I can’t let him do anything to you if I’m here.”

“I’m just as capable of protecting myself.”

There was a sudden doubt in Ludwig’s eyes, memories of the many times Feliciano depended on him for a save…but then he remembered the times Feliciano did well just by himself, without his guidance, power and being. He took a defeated sigh, looking down to the floor as he kept a tighten hold of Feliciano’s grasp, letting himself accept, truly trust as he knew he could give to him.

“When are you thinking of coaxing him as you’re planning?” He was beginning to go along. Feliciano alighted as this sudden chance of command, of the plan being his, one he could be confident in.

“Three days, it’s enough for him to think that I’ve accepted my prison here, as well as some sort of loyalty to him.”

How Ludwig hated that, shown in the way he grasped harsher at Feliciano’s arms, ever slightly pulling him much closer to himself.

“I still won’t let him do anything to me,” Feliciano confided, coming into his lean, into his wrap, into the tightening of Ludwig’s arms.

“As soon as I have the information, I’ll come for you, I can unlock this door and we can go there together,” he promised, a sureness that Ludwig could easily confide in, swaying, kisses upon their heads, distracted then in their fall against the bed, in their rest, away from any doubts, any insecurities.

In the coming three days, Feliciano let himself the routine Khaos had placed for him. It was the same pacing and wandering around the room in the mornings. The afternoons Khaos will find his presence, sometimes to just walk around the halls, letting the dark king point and explain all the architectural and artistry details, which in honesty had Feliciano interested and he listened even if the décor of this place was one he would never prefer or try to create. Others they would sit by the throne room or in the study room, Khaos commanding and speaking about whatever sparked his fancy while Feliciano just remained in his faraway spot, glaring and speaking all the battles in his mind. The nights, it was Ludwig, it was times of speaking that they let lost in the last year, it was caresses, it was leans, it was that love of their dreams, needed to recharge, to survive.

“I love you,” Feliciano had said once again in a fleeing, both at the brinks of dreams. Ludwig had awakened as if the whole room was shaking, having to convince himself for a while that it was real, that he said them, that he could reply his own “I love you”, that he could hold him closer, that he didn’t have to fight with his own self against this, that he could smile and sleep, knowing, trusting.

The next day, Feliciano would put his plan into play. As expected, he was called to join Khaos in his study room, so he decided to head on wearing one of the robes the dark king had given him. He settled on a tight one with a long soft cape, his form shown uncomfortably so for the eyes of King Khaos. He had to admit that it was beautifully decorated, with symbols, sewn designs, buttons and fabric that were of riches and wealth. This one had slight touches of red, one Khaos had simply thought would look exquisite on the young arising queen, while Feliciano convinced himself that he wore them because of his kingdom, as a form of reminder of his people and what he would do to assure them a future. When he headed down the halls, following behind Angela, the servants stared on surprise to see that Feliciano had accepted to the wear, confiding in a soon join perhaps, but the fierceness that he tried to keep in his eyes made some think otherwise. He was suddenly nervous when they presented themselves before the doors, waiting for Khaos’s approval of entering, having to settle a breathing pattern, to strengthen his goal and belief that he could persevere, focused on the mission and on the limits. The doors departed and Angela could only give him but gazes of comfort, a smile that was enough of a push to bring him inside once again, all for the gaze of the owner of this castle. He was looking over a map of the entirety of the world, of the four kingdoms, his hand with the high presence of a rich glass, filled well with wine that he took constant sips from, refilling on and on, leaving him ongoing in his drink. He smiled, eyes tracing all over his in delight.

“How gorgeous,” he complimented, not for a moment leaving his gaze as Feliciano moved forward, hips swaying, graceful, eyes focused on the king, but with a spite that he could not hide easily.

He took his seating, a close one this time, clear enough as to take every detail of Khaos’s own robe, his glass and his surrounding of strange items.

“Thank you,” Feliciano at least said gently, hands on his laps, trying to keep his inner stability.

“What made you decide on this?” He finally placed his glass upon the desk, trying to keep his more forceful focus on the arising queen.

“It was…pretty and I wanted to test it out…it’s really soft,” Feliciano managed a smile, spreading his hands over him tightly, as part of his play but also because he was nervous and he needed to relieve himself somehow.

“I’m glad, I hope I get to see you in more of my own outfits.”

“We’ll see,” he smirked.

Khaos moved slightly closer, taking sitting on his desk, crossing his own legs while his gaze fell obviously on Feliciano’s, and to his working, he began swaying them.

“A different one each day,” Khaos suggested.

“You only gave me five.”

“I’ll have more made, I have many seamstresses.”

“And they can make all you wish?”

“Of course.”

“What about what I wish?”

It took Khaos by surprise but he was quite accepted to it, leaning to him with quite an interest.

“What is it that you wish?” He tempted.

Feliciano wished many things, all of them exploding through his mind, distracting and clenching as if holding from wishing it all.

He wished to get out, he wished to be with Ludwig forever, he wished to be crowned, he wished to be the queen his people wanted and needed, he wished to know more of the ace power he recently discovered, he wished Ludwig wouldn’t be affected by a surge that would change him and Feliciano wished he or anyone else could defeat Khaos.

As he pretended on a smile while they shared a stare, Feliciano made sure to himself that he would defeat Khaos, that he would see him dead, in honor of all he killed and destroyed, for the other Aces, for Romulus and Augusta.

Back to the plan, back to the playing.

“I could…make some designs myself,” Feliciano suggested.

“Really, what do you have in mind?”

“Something…powerful, something…seductive and…free,” he practically sang, he lulled, a dreamy haze that he watched proudly as Khaos was caught in. Another lean, closer, he was now right before Feliciano and he knew that from there he had to be careful.

“I like these ideas,” Khaos smirked.

“Yet…there needs to be more…I wished I could know more…I wished I could add something to match along with my stay here, to perhaps something of your own magnitude.” Feliciano wore that dashing smile that would have all he wanted swaying and loving, to fall to his belief and his want.

“I am here to offer it,” Khaos confided.

“What can you offer?”

“All the information you need…symbols, spells, power, design, even color, it’s all at my fingertips.” He knew he could omit it surely.

“It…can’t be so easily conjured like that…”

“It can, I know everything.”

“Do you really?”

“Of course, my mind is a powerful one, it can hold it all.”

“Can it truly?” Feliciano bit and licked his lips, exalting their glow, their softness, holding down from Khaos angering, from assaulting at such doubts.

“It can…as well as I can call on it whenever I wish."

“How so?”

Khaos hesitated for a moment, but it was forgotten when Feliciano blinked those big bright brown eyes with shimmering long eyelashes.

“A library, not just any from your castles or public halls, no. This one, was given to my sister and I by the very universe,” he played out to wonder and Feliciano feigned into it, showing interest as if it was the very first time he was hearing about it.

“Everything, absolutely everything about the very creation of existence, of magic, every secret, every detail that you didn’t think possible. The universe didn’t leave anything without my knowing,” he smiled proudly, he relished in it, as if the very universe was currently embracing him.

“It…cannot be real…the Aces, our kings, queens, jacks and people should have held this as well, we…deserved this knowledge,” Feliciano slipped, disobeyed, uttering an inner annoyance.

“I wasn’t going to accept it.” Sudden darkness, fierce anger, like he was calling upon shadows to strengthen his stature. Feliciano had to hold himself from shivering, trembling, from screaming out a new wish to leave.

“I don’t believe such things should be handed to just anyone. It’s only right the first ever entity that was created should hold it and decide its wish of it. Perhaps it’s better, perhaps it avoids having the very universe collapse.” He rubbed his hands as if erasing his anger, bringing back his seductive calm, his walk, his circling around Feliciano.

“Like you wouldn’t do the same,” Feliciano dared once again, but to his surprise, Khaos only smiled, turned to him unperturbed.

“I have use for this world, Feliciano. I wouldn’t harm it so harshly.” He showed a sadistic smile that Feliciano grew weak to.

“What could possibly be in there that could help you take such power and control?” Feliciano rolled his eyes, leaning back into the cushion, extending his legs, up and down, the form and movement one Khaos couldn’t ignore, couldn’t avoid the licking of his lips and his approach.

“I told you…everything,” he whispered with a breath as he leaned, close enough for Feliciano to feel every tingling, every alert.

“Show me,” Feliciano whispered back, softly and enchanting, daring that closeness that brought their faces inches of clear details. It was beauty that Khaos couldn’t stand, that he wanted, and if meant giving him this for a chance of having him in his grasps, he obeyed.

Khaos’s room was all the imperialized darkness that Feliciano was expecting, a largeness, an intimidation that seemed to hide openings to more than whatever Feliciano’s mind could extend of what this place was. Luxury, richness, only the best, only the outmost beauty, Khaos smiled, knowing that Feliciano would make a nice addition when the time came. For now the arising Queen kept his space as Khaos reached a large empty wall, with nothing but the usual dark curtains that framed every area. He extended his arm, he chanted words of his language that Feliciano did his best to remember well, along with his movements, along with the design of lights that appeared until a single line was shown, the one that Khaos pulled until a new dark space opened for him. He smiled in finality, like everything was already cleared while Feliciano was still finding some kind of hint of what he wanted to see.

“Come,” he offered his arm for Feliciano to take, but he refused, instead just offering closeness, with a nod and a smile that was enough for Khaos to start the embark that he followed.

Much like the descend of the ruins where Augusta’s relics were kept at the bottom of the Clubian castle, it was a dark tunnel of nothingness, steps that went deeper down, the only sound being the echo of the steps they took. Even if he was with Khaos, Feliciano felt deeply alone, craving for a hold, one he knew that Khaos could give, but he rather not, in this moment he rather depend on himself, a show he did by wrapping his own arms around himself as he felt the air become more humid. It was not the kind of air he expected, especially from a library.

Intricate columns soon carved the space, a turn around that welcomed them into the official entrance. It was smaller than what Feliciano was expecting, a squared space that he could walk around in a small instant, but it did pile high, the bottom cushioned quite well, homey and inviting. Feliciano honestly did not seem to mind the thought of having a nice cup of coffee here, especially since it wasn’t so foreboding with the various colors that decorated. Its heights ended at a top light at the ceiling, surely from the white of the snow outside, helping in illuminating along with the torches that lite the books that reigned down, ancient, old, seeming to shine with the most precious jewels or even stars.

Feliciano did not expect to actually be wondered by it, nearing, the first book he spot being one that explained all kinds of Ace symbols, their meaning, power and why were they imprinted on an Ace. Feliciano had to hold himself from taking it out of its shelf, as Khaos obviously kept a sharp eye on him, instead letting his eyes swim across all kinds of topics.

How the passing of spirits worked after death, how to control the very seasons, how to time manipulate, how to create life, even how to reestablish a world that has gone through ultimate destruction. All excellent things, but not exactly what he should be looking for, what he should take.

“Like I said, everything,” Khaos made clear once again, pointing to even the ones at the very top. He surprisingly let Feliciano in his wandering, feigning impression and curiosity, hiding his determination to find what he was looking for. He tried to keep his exaltation when he found one of powers that passed by generation, remembering well where it was located before he found another one explaining all kinds of bursts that could occur during a universal alignment. There was a volume of four books, Feliciano seeing that it was written by Pisa herself, for all kinds of powers Aces held and their explanations. There was another collection of books about universal power, the largest of the hand of creation, another of dark curses, surely for what Ludwig held. Truly everything was here as Khaos had said…and as Augusta had said.

He had one part, he knew where it was, it was a matter of looking for an escape, of running, of heading out. The expectation, that coming glow was enough to alight him in a shine, one Khaos found irresistible, that brought him close, an extending of arms, in a reach, knowing what it wanted and how to grasp. Feliciano felt him loomed, moving just in time, in a quick swift, trying to pretend that he was interested in the red scale of a book that had to do with the creation of all the animals and creatures. Feliciano kept smiling to him as if to show no wrongness, his usual innocence that didn’t beg for explanation and thus Khaos fell into, not asking.

“This is truly wonderful,” Feliciano complimented, with honest awe, moving away, finding whatever book in the furthest reach to keep finding his escape.

“I’m glad for your fancy. Have you seen enough?” He still had other plans and at least he had shown him what he wanted, hoping as a form of coaxing for a soon opening.

“More than enough, thank you so much,” he had some decency to at least tell him, the only time he brought himself closer willingly.

Khaos smiled, coming close to his own reach expecting, but as quickly did Feliciano move and turned towards the exit, with smiles of normalcy that would be compliant to whatever new turn Khaos would bring them into.

Khaos still craved for that chance, still knew it would appear sometime and thus he was calm, he accepted, he moved along. The darkening clutches would soon wrap themselves around the arising queen’s figure and he would soon enjoy every grasp for himself.

Chapter 51

Chapter Notes

> After two months of dealing with no electricity and signal, stressing over my move, I finally have managed to update! Greetings from Ludwig's country, where things are settled enough for me to now have some time to write. I really, really, really, really apologize for the time it took me, things were honestly still very difficult and things in Puerto Rico are still as bad as I left them. But now expect some…semblance of normality to my updates, hope that you're still interested, there's still SO MUCH left to go. I hope you enjoy!
>
> Warning: There's an attempt of rape in this chapter. ONLY AN ATTEMPT. I can spoil and say that it will be the only time in FATKOH it will happen. I have marked a '*' to signify where it starts and ends for those who are uncomfortable and don't want to read it.

If they were going to escape, Feliciano had to clear a lot of things before they settled themselves on such a mission.

With some ounce of freedom, Khaos having entrusted him enough to let him walk on his own, Feliciano kept a faithful watch on how the movements of the castle worked. He took notice of all the few guards and where they were located, the schedules of the servants, including Angela, all openings, all windows, doors, their nearing to the ground and what kind of leverage they could give to two people who would climb down with a heavy load of books of the highest importance. He smiled to all he passed by, trying to feign that his eyes weren't gazing to whatever cranny, whatever light, whatever item that could help.

After he was sure of his inspection, he settled on his next focal point, and that was finding the places Augusta had told him about. Luckily much of the castle remained in the same structure it had been long ago when it was in the heavens, marred, some pillars leaning out of place or halls blocked, but just in Augusta's words. He settled with searching for the most hidden one, one of those many that was blocked by debris of centuries. Using a slight amount of his power, he moved the rubble away, granting him entrance to the elder walls coated in age, felt and scented strongly in the humid air and heavy cold. Luckily the cape he wore provided warmth, taking and wrapping it well on his figure.

He inspected the hall around him, making sure he wasn't followed, no spying eyes, no other lingering presence, before he dared set forward into this new hell, ready to face the freezing, perhaps danger, but overall a sure chance. With his magic, he rose the parts once again to close, no proof of his presence and confident no one would spot him or follow behind. Decided, he continued, finding nothing but the same extend, the same humidity, the occasional crack of white that drifted heavy cold air and the light of snow that blasted upon

the castle eternally. He panicked whenever it seemed that the walls shook, bits of pebbles falling right by his head, along with the same rumble of hurried steps moving above, shouts, in the darkened language, surely of general and commanders training their men or moving them about the castle. Perhaps he was down below the training grounds and it made him panic. Was this really the safest route? Under the grounds of dangerous men who he was sure would not give a care if they had to smash across the floors to reach them, capture and bring them the worst for their try. He could hear them, even their whispers, even their gossip and noted to remind Ludwig that if this was the route they chose, they had to be quiet until they found their opening…which Feliciano hadn't found yet. He had to force himself to continue, more determined on silencing his steps, which only made him slow, agitated, especially as it turned colder, darker, his hands having to feel the dampened walls to continue to have his leverage.

Soon he was in the gulf of utter darkness, not a glimpse of light, all escapes away from his vision, only but his forward, only but his straight through, until he bumped, until it ended. He met with another wall surely, of tightly stacked bricks, large from what he could caress and without a breeze to spare from the outside. No matter what he pushed, no matter whatever small line spaces he tried to get in between, there wasn't any budging, any new light, any chance of air or a sureness that Feliciano now thought was wrong to depend on.

It couldn't be this easy, Khaos must have sealed everything off decades ago, the design must have surely changed in the move from the heavens, there was no way it could be here, there was- focus and keep looking.

He felt that whisper, felt her voice, her presence linger oh so sweetly around him for mere seconds, falling to her command, her trust. Breathe and go forward as he had done, as he had learned, as he needed to be.

Like magnets calling for their meet, the very wall seemed to drag his hands forward to a center, to a recognize, an instant warmness, an embrace that seemed to say: "Welcome back, our dear Ace." An alight of red, a heart symbol glowed, spreading, unlocking and then it was gone. Nothing instantly happened and Feliciano was worried that whatever this was just didn't work properly. In a sigh he pushed his hands slightly forward and there was light, the bricks…floating away, in a disarray, but maintaining close enough to the side walls that held it, trying the best they could to lessen the storm that began to enter.

The large white expanse, the surrounding snow-covered hills, a passage right between that was perfect, in the distance dark spots, surely of the dark men who were scouting, looking for a new escape or a new attack on the recently strengthened field. Feliciano let his boots step on the crunch of ice, daring testing foots forward to the harsh cold, the bricks flying away, but maintaining still in the area waiting for their close. Feliciano wrapped his arms around himself stronger, murmuring heat spells and turning to gaze upward to the largeness and intimidation of the dark castle. The tunnel he just went through was actually quite far off from the building, some towers even hazed by the storm, which meant that it would make their escape less noticeable, they would probably think them dots of their men.

He took one last glance to the distance, only visible through a small part between the pass, his eyes trying to extend as far as the wall of trees that stood at the other side of the field. Of

their side, of their belong and where they needed to return. It was a fearsome distance, Feliciano could already feel the strain in his legs, of the hurry and force they would surely have to take.

There was a sudden echo of a shout, instantly straining Feliciano to a shocked halt, leaning into a fetal position hoping he could be mistaken for a rock to whoever was shouting in the area. As the minutes passed on, the shouts continued, Feliciano watching in between the strong wind that hit for the source, but the more he focused his hearing, the more he realized that it was coming from inside the castle.

He remembered the training grounds he walked under, the shouts approving that it was in fact what he thought, Feliciano even managing to spot some men marching as others lead. He had to go back inside before someone noticed, slow, practically crawling, until finally he felt under him the stone, the bricks following behind him in quite an elegant assemble, closing, adjusting back to its earlier fortitude, back into the pitch darkness, to some sense of inner walled heat, to a hiding that let Feliciano breathe and relax into the area.

He was sure of an exit now, they had a way, now it was telling Ludwig, now it was getting the books.

He made his way to the cellars, first time without Angela's guidance, onward without a care of who would notice. He was desperate to say, desperate to formulate something to get them out as soon as possible. Now that there was something, now that they could head out, the darkened walls seemed to get blacker, seemed to taunt him more and he couldn't take it much longer. He practically smashed himself upon the door, for a moment dizzying, but it was enough to remind him that this door was locked and needed key. To hell with it, he laid his hands on it, worked on another heating spell like the ones he had used constantly to bring him warmth, letting it melt under his touch until it fell uselessly to the floor, granting him instant access to the room. It startled both Ludwig and Pookie, who stood when they noticed the hurriedness Feliciano came in with, not bothering to even close the door behind him, only wanting Ludwig's embrace, his strong arms around him, his callous hands tracing over this new darkened fabric. Pookie offered to close the door, then settling himself on Feliciano's shoulder as Ludwig lulled him in simple sways, silent for now, just letting this all relax the brunet enough until he reminded, until he jolted in hurry.

"I found a hidden escape route!" He announced quite excitedly, for once a smile, giddiness close enough to force Ludwig into a join of jumps and dances.

"You-you did?" Ludwig was honestly surprised.

"Mhm! And I found the library, it was in Khaos's room!"

"Did he do anything to you?" He feared, letting a hand trace on his face, trying to bring comfort to whatever horridness he tried to do.

"I didn't let him! I told you I could do it! He fell easily and I even got the code to entering!"

"And just by… seducing him?"

“Mhm.” Innocent, cute, a childish smile that brought a lot of questions to Ludwig.

“Are you…serious?”

“Yes! Now all we have to do is hurry up and plan something to get out of here quick!” He determined, more so in the way he grasped harshly to Ludwig’s hand.

“How much time are you allowed to be here?”

“I’m staying the night with you like I always do!” Especially when they had to plot something like this.

“We won’t miss a single detail then,” Ludwig leaned, letting a smile, enough to prove that they would work out something together. They would have an outing soon.

“I can’t wait to leave and stop wearing stuff like this!” Feliciano held disgustingly to the cape of his wear.

“I can’t wait to rip it off you!” Ludwig let himself the furies of the moment, only to realize late what exactly it was he said, paralyzing him, leaving Feliciano in a blushing deep red.

“I mean um…yeah I would rip it off you, but not in that way, I mean, maybe one day when, okay um, if you want, now is not the moment, not that you’re not alluring right now, um….uh…um…” only stuttering and gibberish continued, the red in his pale cheeks worsening, making him shine adorably to Feliciano, who chuckled so enchantingly.

“Ludwig…in the right moment, I’ll let you rip anything you want off me.”

Ludwig couldn’t believe he let himself doubt that seduction of the highest charm…or that he could stay standing or even manage to continue speaking on about their plans afterwards.

That morning, just at the dullest gleam of light began announcing what they could tell as day in that prison, Feliciano took a silent peek to the hall as his awakening. There was no one, no whisper, no steps, no energy, he could move forward, sparring Ludwig one last smile before he headed off, door shut, the lock burned to a crisp on the floor and Feliciano just hoped that he could keep Angela distracted enough to not check this area. He settled off trying to find the said woman, worried to not spot her through the early busying of the servants, guards and soldiers. He ended up finding her in one of the upper floors, on a nice comfort area showcasing the everlasting storm, settled well with a book on her lap, reading in a tranquility that made her shine like any other human.

She did not deserve to serve this castle, Khaos or to even be cursed as something of his creation. He really wished he could do something to liberate her of this, offer her a promise, but he couldn’t now, he didn’t know what kind of future he could give her, how he could manage to escape with not only Ludwig and Pookie but also her. Would they accept her in the kingdoms if they did manage out? Could he show that she could prove herself worthy no matter being those of the dark? Could she be happy? Would she even accept leaving this

tyranny that she has been enforced for centuries as her normal? Could he confide in telling her his and Ludwig's plan? No matter, he would try to give her what he could, he just needed to formulate better how exactly he was going to do it. The time would appear, the chance would be given anew, Feliciano was confident, but for now, he had to fulfill a dire mission.

The breaths he took in preparation were enough to startle Angela from her reading, an honest smile in welcome to the arising queen's presence, no annoyance in the close of her book, actually quite excited to be able to speak to him.

"Your highness, good morning. Is there something I can do for you?"

"Oh no, don't fret about it, I was meaning to ask if you've had breakfast this morning."

"I've mentioned it to you, your highness, but I'm not allowed to unless King Khaos approves."

Feliciano rolled his eyes and gave a small groan, "I won't permit it, come on, let's go get some stuff from the kitchen and we can share in my room."

Angela actually turned giddy, setting her book aside and not showing any other negations as she followed behind the other.

In the usual hides they took when doing something against Khaos's wishes, they reached the kitchen, stealing away some bread, cheese, fruits and yogurts before they headed off and found a morning and evening in Feliciano's assigned room. They ate, they chatted as if they had been good friends for years, such topics as Feliciano talking about Ludwig's muscles and Angela teasing him about it. They laughed, holding such an opening and connection that by the time lunch came, Feliciano offering Angela one of the cherry drinks he took, he felt bad for adding the sleeping liquid he had gotten from the kitchen, settling her off to sleep in a matter of minutes. She seemed so relaxed, so comfortable, Feliciano wondering about the last time she had such a fulfilling sleep.

He settled her to rest on his bed, making sure she was well covered as well as that her head laid comfortably on the pillows, settling one last note under her sash before he was ready, out into the halls to go on with the next part.

If things went as they hoped, that note would be the last Angela would see of the arising queen.

Feliciano took his usual stride down the halls, eyes alert and focused, wanting to seem unsuspecting for any guard or servant he met, but for Pookie and Ludwig to send him a proper signal of their reach. By the end of the hall, near to what would be the upward that would lead to the tower where Khaos's room was located, Feliciano spotted the familiar little winged lion, taking circling flights around a pillar, glowing upon seeing its master. It would have quickly dashed into Feliciano's welcoming arms if it wasn't for the sudden hand that took a grasp of its tail, pulling him back to their settled hiding. Once Feliciano reached, he spotted Ludwig, unscathed yet still as hesitant, not daring to leave the shadows of this particular pillar until they were sure of their surroundings.

“Any guards?” Feliciano questioned in a whisper.

“There were some pacing earlier. Their rounding was just as you said, I easily moved around them,” he was proud.

“Are you sure no one spotted you?”

“Positive.”

“Great, now come on, before somebody realizes you left your cellar or a servant catches us.” Feliciano took his arm and lead him upward, their next destination and one step forward to their liberating.

They were cautious, they peeked through every hall, making sure of its vacancy before they headed on, easy steps, slow, unsounding, a repeat until Feliciano stopped them before a familiar door, one of the most imperial in the castle, in solitude, surprisingly no other in the area but the three of them.

“Are you sure Khaos is not here?”

“Angela told me he’s focused in his study room right now and there’s a big chance he won’t leave until dinner."

“We still have to hurry."

“I know,” Feliciano breathed, both shaking as they stood rather fearful before the doors, as if awaiting some kind of trap, a shout, anything that would stop them that very moment, but it never came.

Sure, Feliciano simply worked with the locks of the room with his magic and pushed open the doors, not so quick as to not let any of the hinges resound soundly, just a mere thing for only this hall to hear. They were inside, Feliciano instantly hurrying to the empty wall that he knew led forward to the library while Ludwig and Pookie took watch of this room for the first time, distracted to not have noticed as Feliciano practiced the spell in a whisper, even the movements of his hands, awaiting until Ludwig was by his side to properly do it. A breath, an alight, a release of his power, the words, the magic, lighting up as to be expected, once again taking familiarity of Augusta’s magic, which it took with comfort and welcome to this new holder, her great grandson.

It opened, they couldn’t believe, perplexed in the spot, meeting this new void only with their stature and silence.

“Come on,” Feliciano confided, leading both in the descend, torches alighting their movement and the doors closing behind, leaving them truly alone in the room, with safety and time to be able to choose what they wanted to bring with them.

Ludwig made sure to be close, always one step behind Feliciano, guarding him over whatever suddenness could occur, ready to defend away, even if said person was practically skipping his way down the stairs.

They were so close, so close!

Finally they reached the bottom, the library igniting in the colors Ludwig did not expect to see, wondered, mouth agape as he took in its shine, wondering if it was possible to just bring all of this with them. Feliciano was distracted himself in that very thought and it was actually Pookie who reminded with his hurrying flight around them, insisting, they still didn't know what could happen. Feliciano took out two bags he had hidden under his cape, one for Ludwig, one for himself, enough a sign for both to begin, to search through, pick and take.

The hand of creation, Ace power, generational power, curses, universal alignment, monsters, war strategies, dark magic, they even ended up bringing one of spells, so many unknown ones that Ludwig couldn't hold his curiosity about. He let himself open one of them, quickly going over the lines that took his major interest, especially ones that could be omitted through simple mind lengths for when your body was incapacitated. Lost he was in his reading he didn't notice as Feliciano filled his bag to completion, determined to have more than enough as Ludwig surely did…that was until he spotted him distracted in pages.

"Ludwig!" Feliciano couldn't believe he was actually scolding him to hurry, startling the blond enough to a closing of the book, placing it in the bag and continuing with whatever pickings he could still squeeze in. Even Pookie joined, taking some that he seemed to transfer into the jewels of his head as some sort of saving, Feliciano hoping he could later release them once needed.

No other book took Feliciano's or Ludwig's interest afterwards and their bags were now heavy enough with more than necessary. Determined, they placed them on their shoulders, ready for the run to the hidden tunnel that would bring them out.

"You got everything?" Ludwig made sure.

"Let's go!" Feliciano hurried them, quickly taking their upward without another distraction.

They were just beginning and already they were panting under the heavy weight of the bags, mixed along with their anxiousness and begging for a freedom that was there, so close, so close. There was the door, there was their exit out of the darkness, into a new light, closer, closer, closer. Khaos's eyes met them as soon as they were out, impending them, glaring with such a scold stronger than whatever their parents had used in their growth.

"How rude," he simply said, motioning his hands with magic that was easy for him, in an instant pushing them against the wall, frozen and hanging, their bags falling, the books spreading upon the floor and easily revealing what they had taken. Khaos only tsk as he saw them before him, pushing some aside with his foot as he came closer to where he had them strained to the wall, not giving them the peace to let a single movement free, using his magic to only pain them for every breath and every spot of blood that moved through their bodies. Groans resounded, whimpers, aches, melodies to the dark king, who dared to smirk before them.

"After I grant you my hospitality, this is how you repay me," he reprimanded, enjoying the spectacle their anguish showed.

“I should have seen this coming, this shouldn’t be surprising me, but I do admit I was rather blinded, Feliciano was just so delectable to deny,” he admitted as much, letting them fall, slamming them hard against the floor, coughs joined along in their cringing.

“I really did not think you would both go this far, I thought I finally had you easily in my grasp, but you are just like Romulus and Augusta, so eager to pester and anger me at no limits or restrains. Really, what disrespect.”

A new weight laid on them, like a heavy waterfall pushing them harder against the floor, leaving them breathless. “You forget that I am also a god, you forget that I was here before those lousy Aces, that you both wouldn’t have even existed if it wasn’t by my doing. I am an entity of the universe, I am not to be messed with, I am not to make a fool of," his voice roared, adding to the crush that seemed to be breaking Ludwig and Feliciano’s bones.

It was hard to do any kind of flexing, even at their neck did it seem to crack to the worst, bounded to be statues with deplorable fates if this falling aura continued. How Feliciano managed to be able to turn his head, going against any more forceful restraints of magic, he thought had to do with pure conviction. He would not let himself be handed so easily, he still held belief in breaking out, in showing, in doing anything, something to prove stronger than this choke Khaos had of them. It was truly proud until he noticed that Khaos wasn’t alone, finally noticing the body that he held from the back of her dress. Feliciano knew she was unconscious, her familiar black hair falling down to hide her face, her body showing that slump of defeat, with no life, gone, splayed on the ground clearly uncaring to the darkened king that held her. Feliciano’s eyes began to salt with pain, biting his lip to hide both the groan of pain and despair over Angela.

“What…what did you do to her?” He somehow managed to growl, somehow managed to anger, show through no matter.

Khaos was impressed once again with the young arising queen, smirking, first of all raising a little note that he hid well in the palm of his hand. It was the note Feliciano had left her, letting her know of his escape with Ludwig, thanking her for everything she did, apologizing for his brash leaving and promising to one day set her free from Khaos’s clutches.

Feliciano froze, he stuttered as if trying to find some kind of excuse, but the note was free for Khaos, watching as he easily let it burn to a crisp in his hand, the ashes of it flying away just as he had dropped the lifeless body on the floor. Feliciano gave a panic shout, trying to ease himself closer in some kind of saving, but it was then as her hair was moved out of place that he saw the horror of paled skin, darkened vines pumping to her darkened eyes, lips and any rose that once made her lively.

“This is not as pitying as I thought.” A simple snap of his power and she began to crumble away in the same ashes, as easy as the note, as useless as garbage, away and Khaos as uncaring, no matter what she had been to him once.

Feliciano clawed, let the tears taint his cheeks well, the sight causing a thirst that wouldn’t let him scream his mourns, wouldn’t let him send blame to this monster. A monster, a monster, he’s a monster, Feliciano glared true in his eyes, sharp and vengeful even in his limp on the floor.

“You-you-you’re awful!” He managed to spat, nothing to Khaos, it only made him grin that sickening way.

“I only do what’s necessary to protect my castle and all its belongings,” he simply said, excusing it lightly.

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Ludwig and Feliciano did not expect him to suddenly push Ludwig back unto the wall, Feliciano thrown in just the same harsh towards the single bed in the room, his body jumping slightly before Khaos deepened him more into the fabrics and pillows.

Suddenly the force was gone, instead a different kind of caging that left them both perplexed, managing to stand, wanting to run, but with each try Khaos just pushed them more into their decided surface.

“I’ve grown impatient,” he stated. With another flick, a dark binding wrapped itself around Ludwig’s torso, sticking him into place on his spread on the wall, his face forced into the frontal looking of the room, on nothing else but on the bed Feliciano tried to break himself from. Khaos turned to the bed, a sickening smirk that made Feliciano tremble excessively, fearing what could come, trying to push himself away, away from those eyes that traced on him so disgustingly.

Khaos paced toward the bed rather slowly, with a hunting intent, but it was different from that of violence and blood, it was another kind of subjugation that had even the nails on Feliciano’s toes shaking. Ludwig began to understand, dread coming in, fists intensifying and the force of his body continuing in his try for an outing. He had to, he had to, no matter how the binds crushed him more with each push and extend, he had to get out!

“Don’t look so scared, just yesterday you seemed rather eager for something like this,” he sneered, his knees meeting with the edge of the bed, bringing himself closer to that adoring heat, his eyes traversing as he wanted, forcing with his mind to leave him as he was, already enough of a delight, if even the tears that slowly began to coat his eyes.

“As dashing as you look in my robes, I think you would look better without them,” he smirked, raising his hand yet again. A snap and just like that Feliciano found himself draped in only but his long undershirt, loose, opened across his chest for Khaos to lick his lips at, a hand reaching.

“No…no…no, no, no, no!” Feliciano began to shout as the tears began to fall with his desperation, moving away, but he was well tied with magic, hands now above him, his legs not bothering even if he willed them to kick.

“Leave him alone! Don’t you dare!” Ludwig handed his own shouts, baring even teeth as he continued in his try to pull out.

“Pipe down and enjoy from what you’re about to see. You can learn a thing or two. Lucky you are that I even let you watch,” he smirked, hands now over the petite man, his breath powerful enough to make Feliciano’s entire body shiver, for his whimpers to be clear, his

heaving more potent and it all fueled Khaos in his want, in his prepare, already beginning to unzip his own robe, coming in to take that scent that was sweet, even powerful with traces of his Ace blood. He needed him his, instant, all and for that damn Heartian prince to see and break with the joy he was to take.

“No…no, please, don’t! Don’t! Don’t touch me!” Feliciano tried to command, his voice trying to go over any force, any continuing potent.

“Don’t you dare come any closer!” Ludwig joined, his own body beginning its own hurt the stronger he tried to weight upon his bonds.

“You’re both in no position to tell me what to do. I’ll take what I want how I want it,” was the last he would say, the intent clear and sure, a single hand reaching to land on Feliciano’s cheek, tracing it rather lightly down the soft expand of his neck and over to his clear chest. Simple, yet already so haunting, so breaking, whimpers being the only thing that managed to grant movement to Feliciano, tears reddening his features as if Khaos was tracing him with burning fire.

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Ludwig did not want a touch, he promised himself not a single finger on him and already that simple movement flared, it was enough to fury, it was enough for his mind to expand, to find, to remember. Deep he found his concentration, deep he went for a sort of help and deep it was he found it. It was dark, it was new, it was unfamiliar, but just enough, just what he needed. He submerged his mind in it, he grasped it, he took instant use of it, feeling an assurance, an acceptance, in fact, it insisted Ludwig to its use, a new familiarity away from Augusta’s…was it…? The magic was flaring, it was arising, it was attacking too quick for him to take notice of this new presence. Like a cut in time it pierced, right through Khaos, a large pillar of utter blackness, solid, smooth and even going through the bed on to the floor below. The space it took was large, enough of a stab that would have killed instantly any human. On a god it worked as a paralyzing, eyes blank, left stranded in that last predatory position with only but the start of surprise and shock on his lips. A drop of blood or two would leak and coat the sheets of the bed, even on Feliciano, who still whimpered, still shook and let the rest of his tears fall freely as himself. He could move his hands, his legs, his body, and the first thing he did was raise his palm to simply wallow over the large relief, but flowing still with confusion over what just happened, unsure, still fearing the cage, the worst that was to come. Ludwig had dropped then as the magic wore off, landing and already sprinting towards the bed, easily pushing Khaos frozen figure aside to get to Feliciano, who instantly raised his arms and Ludwig picked him up, both embracing out their relief, Ludwig not minding at all the shoulder that tainted in tears, rubbing his hands over his back as he continued in his mess, shushing and even kissing his head to assure.

“I’m here, I’m here, it’s over, you’re safe,” he constantly repeated in sweet whispers that drove Feliciano to hold tighter, his hands joined in the caressing of their bodies, uncaring to his half-dressed state and whatever blood fell on him.

Ludwig, Ludwig, Feliciano just wanted Ludwig.

Yet there was still an urgency, they couldn’t remain like this longer, they had to make due.

“We don’t have much time,” Ludwig hurried, helping Feliciano to stand, to calm his shaking enough, handing and even helping him dress in parts of his own robe, taking even curtains or fabrics from around the room to give a more protective wrap for the cold they were sure to take soon.

“Did you…did you kill him?” Feliciano wondered as they finished with the last zip, still hunted by just looking at Khaos’s frozen figure.

“No…” Ludwig sounded disappointed, but with quite a sigh of relief to have at least done something to stop him. “It probably just paralyzed him. We only have eight minutes before the magic wears off, we have to hurry.”

No more consolations, no more stranded eyes and figures, they hurried to once again pick up the books, hurling them in their bags in a mess that in another situation would have annoyed Ludwig, but feeling the timer seeming to ring from Khaos’s mid falling body was anguish that just pushed them enough until the bags were well in their backs and they could hurry off into the halls. They left the doors swung open in carelessness, letting it even rung eerily across the area, hoping their steps were enough to drown it. They had to make do with this silence, they had to run and make their way across the halls with no disarray yet of Khaos’s orders, news and even fury that they knew would be at a peak once he was released.

They didn’t care over the occasional wondering timid servant who would surely eye them warily, instantly setting a haste to Khaos’s room to inform, only to find him in his cage and surely ring an alarm that will fill this castle in a hunt. They had to be at least out in the snow by then.

They made it to the rubble that covered their exit with no one behind them, but Feliciano wasn’t going to let it leave them in any clearing of what could potentially happen. In a strong blast, everything was gone, louder than either had been expecting, surely calling and revealing. They could hear faraway calls, shouts in the darkened language, surely pointing and heading their direction. They bolted, running into the tunnel unfearful of the darkness, dreading more what could come to meet them from behind, only being led by a glow Pookie omitted to keep them from tripping or hitting against any sudden curve it took.

Back in the room, now filled with fretting servants who moved about trying to free their master from such a dark point right through him, the magic was now starting to disperse, slowly, like raising embers until Khaos was once again granted movements, blinks, snarls and an easy standing on the ground if even leaned and trying to regain the breaths of his human body.

“Your majesty!” All of them exclaimed, coming close to offer whatever kind of help.

He only continued to burn a new potent, fisting his hands the more he came to the realization that Feliciano wasn’t beneath him, that Ludwig wasn’t on the wall and that they were off with his books, elsewhere, escaping.

“Master?” Another dared to come close, even to put a hand on his shoulder. The mere movement was enough of an awakening for their king to reach his arm and grab roughly on the servant’s neck, who instantly began choking, but did nothing to release knowing that he could make it worst.

“Get them…”he began to growl, still regaining.

“Ge-get…get who-who sir?”

“Who else would you expect? That prince and his useless queen! Get them! Send everybody! Now! Before they get any further! They cannot leave this field!” He shouted, he fierced, throwing the servant to the floor in an uncaring swing, for now paining at any further step he took, still continuing in his lean, forcing more magic to heal. The servants in the meantime ran off with their commands while their master prepared himself to act.

There was no time for wonder, for curious questions, a single stop was threatening enough, so when the wall opened at Feliciano’s touch, the bricks flying off into the blizzard, neither of the runners hesitated, they passed through at the first opening, into the crush of ice underneath them, the strong wind hitting, cold choking and rampage footsteps behind them.

The walls of the field, they repeated to themselves, their eyes only set on its far distance in the horizon, between the hills, their feet forcing in its push, trying to ignore the shouts, the roar, the coming behind them.

They should have expected for this to not be easy, should have expected a throw, the lance of dark magic hoping to pierce any of the fugitives, landing in a heavy shake on the ground that caused Feliciano to stumble, momentarily hitting his knee on the ground before Ludwig helped him up, holding his hand and leading him forward despite how harsh the steps now became.

They kept raining on them, making them evade in zigzags that distracted, smoke rising that seemed to hide the passage, but Pookie kept emitting his light, kept guiding forward for them to pass through yet undamaged through all the assaults.

It was just as they had the walls of the hills surrounding them that one lance was thrown well enough ready to land on their heads, but Ludwig was quick, he had a spell under his breath ready, creating a quick protecting field that had the lance bouncing off the opposite direction, landing instead on men that were coming close, making them drop, disorientate, a new smoke that instead helped Ludwig and Feliciano in advancing more.

“We have to attack back,” Ludwig realized, letting himself think of other ideas.

Feliciano silently agreed, looking back to notice how that last trick gave them better distance from the men.

As they approached the exit of the passage, then now into the last expanse, as Feliciano noticed vicious men begin to appear through the haze, he recalled an old spell, one of the

ones he had used on the walls of the attack on Washington. He started it with a goal of reaching more, intense, burn, fire, he had to remind he had ace magic, he had the hand of creation, he could make it large as needed be. The push he threw back was enough to light up the entire passage, the jets aiming well, the smoke, even the flakes, reaching as high as to make the field alight in disturbance. The impression in Ludwig's eyes as they were finally out of the cage of the hills and into the last they needed to traverse made quite a pride glint in Feliciano's eyes, managing a smile, a smirk in Ludwig's direction, more relief as the wall came closer.

It didn't last, they should have been expecting men awaiting outside the hills who had already received the message. They shouted, many insults, many just battle roars to form as a sort of intimidation. It scared, it made them tremble, fear shone once again in their eyes. They came closer, they gripped their hands once again as a last sign of belief, as a sort of planning and agreeing.

As the groups of either side combined to crash on them, the royals gave a high jump, letting some men crash between themselves, then kick away any sword or spear away with strong forces, blasting away whatever sudden magic they could against any clear weakened spot on the men. They used their falls, their bodies, even their weapons as stones to jump forward, until they could land in the secureness of white ground, for now focusing on avoiding any kind of lunge and just running on ahead.

So close, so close, so close.

The knowing of their proximity seemed to taunt their bodies, weakening, breaths wavering, how they could duck and move around throws and advancing men was surely their perseverance and desperation to just be outside, just be outside. The trees were starting to become clear, the pedestal still up and the new orbs still shinning in their new reign. Feliciano pointed, asserting their closeness, too breathless to even speak. It was just as then a cut managed across his hand, wincing at the added pain, trying to halt the beginning spread of blood by holding his hand against it. He groaned clear, the steps against the ground seeming to push more pain into the wound. Ludwig couldn't stand it, one hand reaching as some sort of help, the other throwing spells upon spells trying to keep the distance from them, attack any who came closer, trip, duck and yet some managed to hit, pushes that already both could feel purple bruises growing at.

Feliciano couldn't stand Ludwig getting hurt, and he wouldn't let him any longer, he determined, he was sure, the desire of protection so strong Feliciano could outgrow it from his soul into the air in a strong blaze of fire, sprouting and raging like a volcano dance quite uncontrollable. Even Ludwig and him suffered from the intense heat, but they managed between, through the harsh fire, until the point of Feliciano's most extended finger could touch the wall. That was it, quickly Feliciano could make the cut as Augusta had told him, just a quick opening for Ludwig and him to squeeze through, having a sudden refresh of cold air away from the fires. It was closed, they passed, landing upon the snow in a mess of exhaustion, befallen to defeat, to an air that let them that rest, with no throws, no dark magic or curses, only the anger of the men as they tried their usual escape from the wall. Useless, their voices sounded muted in the royals' ears, their breaths clearer, the heave of their chests

more visible than the constant flinging of the weapons hoping for the cut Feliciano had so easily made.

They remained in their lay as if testing, proving, clutching to the snow underneath them like it was whispering all the comforts they needed after that run, after that successful escape.

Successful…successful. They were out…they were out!

Ludwig and Feliciano exchanged that glance of fulfillment, of momentary smiles, their breaths now showing their ultimate relief, even beginning to laugh.

A sudden shout, a sudden bang against the wall, lighting it in the distinct colors, reminding them that they were still there, still trying, sending angry glares and surely muffled insults in their language.

Hesitant, a small tinge of fear in their expressions, they finally stood, ignoring the pain, the blood and the new bruises. Feliciano dared to move forward and swayed his hand in a signal that sunk the pedestal, the orbs now hidden in their new place, fulfilling their duty of energy for the time needed.

They could go, they had their bags with the precious books, the road continued on with their freedom, for a return, one that to Ludwig shone more beautifully and promising.

The taller brought a hand to grasp at Feliciano's, pulling him away from the haunting image of the continuing fighting men that seemed ready to crack at any time. That grasp of Ludwig's hand helped Feliciano to distract, to settle more on the calm of his blue eyes, to try and ignore the action and darkness just behind them. Ignore it, ignore it, ignore it, Feliciano told himself, settling his pace with Ludwig in their settling off into the woods, away, never to return and focus instead on the new that was to come. Whatever new worries that would be there to face, elsewhere.

Now let themselves breathe that bliss of freedom.

Khaos could see it all play out by mere dark spots in the distance, the worst to happen, two single figures walking away into the forest that lay beyond, with a cargo of importance that only flared the dark king, the grip in his hand harsh enough to break easily the glass he held, wine that one servant hoped it could calm or heal him enough. In that realization, the few who were there ran off, knowing that this was his worst state.

Let them, let them think that they won for now. The worst is yet to come, and when it arrives, no ancient wall would be enough to stop him, no weapons, no armies, he doubted even Augusta's little gift of protection and hope with the current arising queen of Hearts. What stopped him from raging on his storm, from flooding the castle in his vengeance, was the upper stare he gave to the clouds above, going between them as if he could see the stars sparkling in their refuge.

A year, he knew, a year that those two better enjoy before he set off his new war, before new plans could arise, new intense power and this time he'll have Ludwig, oh rest assure he'll still use him, all when the time comes, all when it aligns.

Chapter 52

Chapter Notes

> Last update in Germany for a while. By the next I'll say where I am c; (You guys have no idea how excited I am for the next chapter)

The apprehension that took the village the last few days was as clear as the snow that had fallen. There was a dreadful silence, people pacing, always watchful to that opening route where the royals had left through a week ago. Every time they passed they were expecting, some of the children sitting up right at the fencing that surrounded, hoping to be the first to give them some sort of welcome candy, while adults whispered their biggest dreads. King Ivan was the only one that showed his worry clear, his pacing the harshest, having sent quite strong commands to the soldiers to either scout the area for any sign of their approach or send messages of emergency back to Moscow…to then transfer to the rest of the kingdoms. The village was crystal in its somberness, so when they heard the distant sound of hooves from the royal horses, the entire population paid good attention, many leaving their houses to meet with the growing crowd, hoping to finally see the two people that had haunted them with worry. There were cheers once they could recognize their robes, although ruined, as well as the familiarity of Ludwig's blond and Feliciano's curls. Ivan had to push himself between his people wanting immediate answers and Ludwig and Feliciano understood to give them, jumping down from their horses as soon as they met with the entrance fence and letting others take care of the animals.

"What happened?" Was Ivan's quick demand, angry and away from that childish innocence his face tended to express.

"I don't even know where to start," Feliciano said, still trying to regain some breath, people coming to offer him better clothes from the useless patches he was covered in, some repelling at recognizing that it was dark cloth of Khaos.

Ivan peeked at this, eyes widening in horror. "Don't tell me you were captured."

"Actually no…I willingly headed inside the field," Ludwig announced, earning gasps from all around, some coming closer hoping to better hear an explanation.

Ivan then realized that this was perhaps not the best place to discuss. He commanded them all to go on with their regular routines of the day, having Ludwig and Feliciano follow him to his own cabin that he had spent fretting this entire week in. He closed all windows, shut all doors, only leaving two of his most trusted guards to watch over the table they chose to properly speak. There Feliciano, as much as he could whisper, told his part, with all the emotion he tended and needed to show. Ludwig admitted his own as well, from the contents of the letter, his role in the next alignment, harboring deep within him Romulus, choosing to

trespass the field, how Augusta helped them, how Feliciano himself got in, their meeting with Khaos, the time they spent as prisoners there, Angela, Feliciano's plan to get the books and finally how their escape had gone.

Ludwig had never seen such level of surprise in Ivan's features, nervously tapping and even moving back in his chair as he tried to find some essence of calm with these words that reminded him of wild tales and stories.

"You had all of us sick with worry," Ivan admitted, remembering all the stress he had gone through, the sleepless nights, already planning what kind of heartbreaking news he would have to write on the letters to their families and kingdoms.

"We're so, so, so sorry about that, but the situation-" Feliciano tried to continue to apologize before Ivan raised a hand in interruption.

"You have already explained yourselves, I was merely stating how things were while you were dealing with this."

Soon his anger subsided, breaths enough to bring him his usual innocent smile, relaxed, relieved.

"But you are here now, safe. We can start official preparations on your return to Berlin, as well as to properly discuss and plan…this coming war."

Ivan brought a sudden array of emotions.

In one part they had their excitement on finally making way home, especially to Ludwig, the words an improbability he thought he would never hear. But returning meant preparing for something big, it meant harsher training, especially since they had the books, telling all the kingdoms the truth of Keron, Augusta, Romulus, the fate that would soon fall upon them and hope that they can take it with enough strength to be part of the force they would have to grow to be. There was weight but liberty to them, an anxiousness that swam clear through their blood and somehow Ivan managed to smile throughout, quite confident and not understanding the arising royals' fears. He gave a rather celebratory slap to the table as he stood, awakening them all from any other dreads.

"Come now, let's pack our bags, send for the carriages and try to be on our way as soon as possible. The faster I get to Moscow, the sooner I can start on the initiating," he was decided, making his way through the door as if the forest already held a paved route that would take him instantly to his capital.

How Ludwig and Feliciano wished it could be that easy.

They spent the rest of the day with healers taking care of their wounds, strains, and cuts, bandaging, putting on potions and creams, and being nagged to stay put and to stop the annoying chuckles they would let out from time to time.

How childishly did their relief show, but for neither there was no better way to be this happy when they both lay on separate beds away from each other. Sometimes their hands would meet on the desk that separated them, their eyes gleaming with a deep emotion of love that was expecting, awaiting, for it to be free as it should have been from the moment they met again at that table a year ago. Their excitement was shown in those laughs they shared whenever their eyes met, already flowing and exploding what was soon to come.

Everything was ready for their departure as soon as the next morning. Healers made sure their bandages were wrapped well before they settled them off and of course Feliciano wished his usual heartfelt goodbyes to those he met in the village. Ludwig was so excited he even joined Feliciano in those goodbyes, a surprise to the villagers, but they accepted them with just the same joys and blessings.

Carriage doors shut, all members well rested inside their compartment, the horses moved on instantly, Ludwig and Feliciano taking solace in their resting breaths, wanting to sink in better on the cushions and truly relish on leaving.

Although Feliciano could find his calm quick, Ludwig was constantly sitting up, taking a look out the window, tracing his hands over the glass, holding to the vibrant images of color, moving to more, to a chance, it almost felt like heading to a new life. Feliciano noticed, liking this new shine that kept Ludwig active and elevated. He scooted closer, until their thighs could touch, until he could wrap himself around his arm, holding his hand, smiling up to him, and Ludwig didn't have to deny it, didn't have to push him off, if anything he shared in that grin, in even letting a kiss fall upon his head.

"How are you feeling?" Feliciano asked, as sweetly as to make Ludwig sway.

"I'm feeling…a lot, I just…I never thought…I would be heading back," he admitted, opening and closing his hand as if still testing if this was the reality, not a dream, not a Khaos induced coma. To replace that testing, Feliciano put his other hand in it, grasping enough that actuality, that moment. They were there, together, with way back to the castle. Sure, not in peace, there was still a lot of turmoil to deal with, but they had their peace with each other and no matter what they could feel confident in their strong union now.

"You are…we are!" Feliciano elated, the truth enough for Ludwig to see that this was happening, the best he thought would not be possible. "Now you can be yourself, now you can be happy…now…you don't have to push me away, you don't have to fear about what Khaos placed in your lineage, we have the books to really find a proper solution without having to lose you." At this he raised a hand to caress at the side of his face, focusing the shine of their eyes with each other, close, true honesty to Feliciano's words.

"Promise me this time, promise you won't ever try to let me go again," Feliciano pleaded, with a recalling of Ludwig's harsh treatments the past year, hurtful memories that were enough to arise tears.

After this, he didn't want that again, he didn't want to feel so unloved by the person he was promised to feel the most with.

The smile Ludwig bore now was sincere, along with the dedication in his eyes as he brought Feliciano's hands to his lips, warming them from those last bits of cold.

"This time, I truly promise that I won't, now I see nothing that can stop me," he was confident, and if anything dared, he would have a desire to fight as Feliciano did by going after him into the field. The event was the proof that no matter the harshness, there was always a light, a crack that they could make big enough to their wishes.

With a last kiss to his head, of the comfort, of the calm, they realized how tired they were and so came to a silent agreement of resting. Close, hands held tight, Ludwig's head on the top of Feliciano's, Feliciano's cradled in Ludwig's shoulder, and like this they wanted their rest, for as long needed be. They preferred it over anything else at the moment.

An entire day and night of traveling, arriving to the Austrian province, the horses gave an immediate knowing halt. It was odd, for they were nowhere recognizable, everything covered in a strong mist, with patches of melting snow, only the top of distant hills to their watch. Ludwig ventured out, insisting Feliciano and Pookie remained inside while he took a watch around, wondering if perhaps the horses just made a mistake, maybe he could convince them to go on. He took the reins of the leader and tried to move him forward, but no matter his words, the horses wouldn't budge, decided.

"I think it is here," Feliciano wondered, peeking out, liking the tall trees in this area.

"How could it be, there's absolutely nothing-" a crack, footsteps, hooves, someone was coming, the presence high.

After constant attacks in this journey, Ludwig took a defensive position, for once going to the royal sword in his belt, an item he managed to rescue after he had headed out from the dungeon in Khaos's castle. The presence that came was not in haste, it was as cool as the very mist that flowed, figures appearing one by one in clearance, atop their horses, deep dark-skinned figures dressed mostly in white, with silver and occasional gold, the symbols of a kingdom that Ludwig could not recognize. But as Feliciano allowed himself to head out more, he instead knew them, after all, he was the one who headed down to the room with all the old relics.

"White kingdom," Feliciano knew, to which Ludwig was confused at. Didn't Pisa's kingdom extinguish completely?

"His highnesses, Prince Ludwig Beilschmidt and arising Queen Feliciano Valenti, are those yourselves?" The tallest of them, with the deepest voice called out, his echo inducing shivers that made one want to bow down in instant.

"Yes, it is us," Feliciano answered, slightly trembling.

"Come follow us, we shall take you to your next point," he addressed again, his group already turning, heading and expecting the royals to be rightfully behind them. Yet Ludwig and Feliciano wouldn't budge, finding this all too mysterious, doubting, but the horses began

to get impatient, neighing and seeming to command their riders to get back into their carriage. So, they did, the carriage moving along in this groups' reach, all surrounding the carriage quite potently, their figures straight, tall, looking proud of every single little item that decorated them. Feliciano's window was facing one of the women, her hair tied to stand as a temple with beautiful silver rings, her lips painted in the same shine, jewels around her eyes, the white and length of her fabric one of the smoothest he had seen. He would have drawn her on his sketchbook if she permitted it…and thus he asked.

"Excuse me, Signorina," careful and kind, instantly grasping her attention. "May I draw you on my sketchbook? You look absolutely divine!"

A blush and a gentle chuckle came from her, Ludwig on the other hand trying to hide his flare, Pookie seeming to laugh at him in taunt.

"It will be an honor, your highness," she accepted and quickly Feliciano went for his bag, starting his sketch and doing an excellent work at it despite the occasional jerking of the carriage. He was just that determined, focused, and balanced when it came to his artistry, in a couple of minutes already having much of his sketch. It was hard for her not to fall in awe, taking peeks away from the rest of the group's frontal guidance.

"Your highness, that is absolutely magnificent!" She complimented, truly taken.

Feliciano alighted in pride, deeming the sketch ready to be colored by his pencils, which Ludwig did the honor of handing them from one of his bags.

"Thank you so much, but it is your own magnificence that inspired. If I may ask, where you did you get all these jewels? I've never seen anything like it outside of old paintings," he found himself asking as he started with painting one of her silver armbands.

She turned hesitant, looking to her brethren for some kind of advice, but neither turned or said a word, meaning enough for her to get that she could speak of this, especially to this specific arising queen.

"Some of these items date to the days of Augusta or older." That was the first time Feliciano had heard someone address those times as Augusta's instead of Romulus's. "Some have been passed down our families, some newer that my ancestors had made themselves possessing the ancient talents of our people."

"And…who are your people?"

"Those of what was once the White kingdom."

"I'm sorry to interfere, but didn't all the citizens of the White kingdom perish after the war of the darkened decades?" Ludwig had to put in, finally saying aloud the words of a question he had been pondering.

"A big percentage, yes, but few families managed to escape and persevere during Keron's attacks, some even fought alongside Augusta. Even after the Heartian ace won, our kingdom was still too poisoned and destroyed to return to. When it fell into Spadian territory and was

reconstructed, all culture and evidence of our people left to instead be more of the Spadian kingdom. Some stayed and mingled with Spadians, some headed to other kingdoms and did the same assimilation, others refused to accept and instead found refuge here in Clubs where we kept our ways."

"Where?" Feliciano wondered.

"Kinshasa," another replied, all having heard the conversation and wanting to take part.

"I've never…heard of such a place in the Austrian province," Ludwig said, truly trying to find the name in the maps he had learned well of.

"It is meant to stay hidden, another mystery to the Clubian woods that we preferred remained as such," bellowed the leader.

"The purpose is to avoid outsiders, the eyes of those of Khaos's from truly annihilating his sister's people, to keep ourselves and protect what we could of Pisa's glory," the woman once again continued.

"And why…why head out now? Why guide us?" Feliciano asked, although he was starting to get an idea.

They all smirked between themselves, coming to an easy agreement, the very woman deciding to voice what was to be their purpose. "You of course."

Feliciano perked, rather surprised still.

"Along with our culture, we kept a lot of information, including those of the reality of the war of the darkened decades, Keron and Pisa as the original gods, Augusta our true heroine, the prophecy of the alignment and the promise of her return through you to save us and take her place," another of the women smirked.

Once again that weigh, once again the impending. He couldn't find it in him to smile back.

"A war is approaching," another dreadfully reminded.

"This time with a chance of truly riding ourselves of Khaos once and for all."

"Our people have talked about stories of your fortuned birth for generations."

"When news approached us, we all instantly set to prepare to receive you on the return of your journey."

"We trained in all kinds of battle techniques and strategies, power, magic, as well as strengthened our writing, our speech, for we hope to also serve as conveyers of the truth to the rest of the kingdoms."

"We assumed that once you found out, you would spread this truth, let the whole world know what were truly fighting for, shine Augusta's name and show who you are."

“As well as offer ourselves as protectors, advisors, and aid in whatever we can to our future ace.” They bowed, even in their sitting conveying so much loyalty and sacrifice that left Feliciano incredulous, bombarded with a kind of adoration that left him speechless.

Silence continued as he settled instead on giving the last touches to his sketch. The women, named Kandake as she later told him, sang praises and hoped in the future to see more of his talent. If they were going to stay with them from now on, the chances to learn would be plenty, and part of him was actually eager to have such exciting people in the castle. They could surely help them, they could learn from the soldiers in the castle as well as they could learn from them. Yet another strength and hope to what the next alignment would bring. He couldn’t show it though. Whenever he was reminded of his future, no matter who or how they told him, it was just tiring to his mentality. He soon forced himself into rest, Ludwig’s arms around his shoulder as a grasp to tranquility in his sleep.

“We are here!” Feliciano heard, along with the loud crash of waves. Ludwig did so as well, rubbing any dryness from his eyes, stretching, wincing at the sudden burn of the sun. He had been in too much grey, white, and cold, even emotionally. This was sudden, but Ludwig ended up smiling and accepting, practically hugging the glow that came. Feliciano was no different, being the first to crash out of the carriage, Pookie trailing behind in his usual flight just as excited for the shinning day. Feliciano’s boots touched sandy shore, before him the wide expand of the ocean, a clear blue day and only a few clouds to give a touch of beautiful scenery. He was so taken by the view it took him a while to notice the ship that was waiting in the distance.

“Feli!” He recognized that voice, his eyes then settling in the dinghy that was approaching with three figures on board, waving frantically and animatedly.

“Feli!” It called again, but this time the figure was clearer, and Feliciano could properly identify him.

“Herakles!” He started jumping, his waves wide, his laughter drowning the beach enough to have the rest smiling in the contagion.

Once they arrived to shore, the two figures that came with Herakles quickly went to get their things from the carriage, but not before bowing to the arising rulers and even to the newcomers from the ancient white kingdom. Feliciano recognized Antonio’s half-brother, who he jumped on and hugged affectionately, the other caressing his hair almost as Antonio would do.

“It’s great to see ya’ Feli, safe most of all. The things the kingdom has heard from the trip have been pretty wild,” João recalled, but still with some wonder and curiosity.

“Well…yeah, it has been. A lot of…things have happened…” he actually blushed, gazing over to Ludwig, who smiled at him endearingly as he helped the others in mounting.

“I’m sure the crew would love to hear the details once were on board. Also, this is Sadiq,” he introduced the third figure, who moved close and bowed rather excessively, a wide smile that

threatened to explode of emotion. “One of the best navigators of the Mediterranean islands. He begged to have the mission on picking you guys up in Clubs, especially after we were told to do it in a deserted area away from big ports. He’s the best in dealing with that kind of situation."

“It is an honor to serve you, your highness.” Sadiq shook Feliciano’s hands vigorously. Feliciano laughed and joined in the excitement, for this man was the lead that will finally take him back to his home kingdom, so he celebrated for a moment before helping the rest in trying to mount everything for a single trip. They somehow managed it, with space to bring all the travelers, the horses set free, and the dinghy, albeit with a lot of force, bickering between Herakles and Sadiq, and the heavy cargo, sailing forward to the boat in the distance.

The new passengers were welcomed with applauses and shouts of feast when they boarded, they blended in with the celebration, singing, drinking, and some even started dances as the ship set its course to the Iberian province in the Hearts kingdom. Already it felt like home, already Ludwig and Feliciano’s body glowed with bliss, even if they spent most of the time just sitting by, watching, enjoying from the drinks and snacks or the chats other crew members instigated. Most of all, the crew wanted a story, especially that of Ludwig and Feliciano’s journey, an epic that had all the kingdoms attentive and wondering.

As the sun settled, the Greek islands passing by them in quite a wonder that Feliciano had sketched, the men and women found themselves surrounding the royal couple, like children expecting the tale of the day, insisting, wanting, and both had ended giving up.

Ludwig and Feliciano told of their very beginnings as they went through the Scandinavian provinces, how they had been captured but later saved by a band of joker Vikings, their passage through the Sahara, their experiences in the Arabic provinces, Paris, the Oralee in Spades, the Indian province, their meet with a village of future seers, the Asian provinces, meeting skilled soldiers of the Spadian High Protection Squadron, how Feliciano overheard the spying Khaos men in Shanghai, the attack in Washington and how they saved the entire Spadian capital. They continued with their traverse of the Amazon, Moscow…and then Feliciano admitted, to the astonishment of all, the findings of the old room hidden underneath the Clubian castle. But of course, it didn’t stop there, they went on with their experiences in the field, being taken by Khaos and later their escape with the books. The silence after they finished was definite, incredulous, astonished, wondered, not even the most drunk daring to take from his drink.

“Wow…” only one managed to say, having to lay down as all the words and new histories formed well in his mental capacity.

“All this time…Augusta was the real…” another worded.

“We’ve been worshipping the wrong person for centuries,” one seemed hurt.

“Are you sure this is something you could have told all of us?” Sadiq asked. It was big. Surely it had to be for royal ears only.

“We need to,” Feliciano assured.

“It’s only a matter of time. Once we arrive to Berlin we’ll conduct a meeting in preparation to have all the kingdoms know,” Ludwig proclaimed.

“It’s dire. A year from now we’ll face Khaos again in his form from the blackened decades. We need all the kingdoms, including royals, enchanters, soldiers, civilians and even creatures informed to take part. The more prepared we are the better,” Abasi, the lead of the white kingdom group, gave his own pledge, in a militant voice that was like they were ready to face Khaos right that instant, causing a dread to spread through the crew.

Of course, they were fearful, some of them shook, some looking between others for some kinds of assurance, but it felt like death was already looming above them. João rolled his eyes, one of the few that seemed rather relaxed, perhaps still in the effects of his alcohol, as one could imagine as he raised his just recently filled glass into the air.

“Stop being a bunch of wimps. We can take him,” he was confident, calm in the sips he took.

Some were just about to comment against, but it was then as another man stood up, his own drink raised, not a hint of the alcohol having possessed him yet. “João is right, we can!” He shouted.

Whispers arose, other men and women began to stand.

“Our kingdoms are strong, powerful, we’ve grown, we’ve gone against different threats and have done successful as we are!” Another woman joined.

“I won’t let my people be darkened like this!” Another man promised.

“We have a chance of getting rid of Khaos once and for all!”

“Peace shall for once settle truly.”

“Let us not forget that we are once again joined by an ace,” one man pointed to Feliciano proudly, who blushed and even quivered in his chair, ready to hide, but it still didn’t hold the smile from watching his people be brave and ready for a threat that still had a year to be performed.

“That’s right! We have a god, we have Augusta!” One shouted in instigation, which caused a roar of chants, hands raising and even drinks spilling as they toasted over an assured victory for the future.

“You can already count on us to join your army!” Herakles actually promised, kind of hard to believe with the ever-bored look in his expression, but strong enough it was in this moment of rising.

“For our unity!” One began, and Ludwig and Feliciano smiled widely knowing what was coming, ready to join.

“For our blood!”

“For Glory!”

“For Honor!”

“For Riches!”

“For the gods!”

“For Hearts!”

The shine they gave was enough to glow along with the stars in this dark ocean night.

Chapter 53

Chapter Notes

> I know, it's been long. But I've been really busy in my travels and had found very little time to write. Last month I spent my time in Iceland, and now I'm in Italy. It's quite cute, I posted the last chapter in Germany and now this one in Italy…It's like…I'm making my fanfiction more powerful. I really enjoyed writing this chapter and I hope you all enjoy reading it. Please excuse how long it takes, despite my traveling, I refuse to stop writing this, just as always, be patient and understanding with me.

Three days of agitating sailing.

Sure, the crewmembers were nice and hospitable, but the closeness to home made the two royals anxious, always heading out to deck to stare at the horizons as if it could get their ship to the next port that very moment. Many joked that they would throw themselves overboard and swim themselves if it wasn't for the joy and entertainment they found in the conversations of the crew.

"How are things with Kiku?" Feliciano had asked Herakles one afternoon as they sat peeling oranges into a pile along with Sadiq.

The Turk smirked and gave teasing eyes to Herakles, who threatened to stab the small knife he held into his thigh and Feliciano had to intervene before things got bloodied.

"Wonderful," Herakles sighed blissfully, a glowing smile, rocking himself in his mind to believe that he was falling to the warmth of his beloved.

"Sometimes he doesn't stop talking about him," Sadiq rolled his eyes.

"I can't help it…"

"It's actually quite endearing. I would probably be doing the same if my partner was the arising Jack of Hearts," Sadiq smirked, sucking now on his newest revealed orange.

"He's more than just the future jack of hearts," Herakles defended.

Feliciano smiled as he went on detailing all the things that made Kiku who he was, the things that made him grand, beautiful, the light in Herakles's eyes, the one who he gave his devotions, his love to and how it just wasn't defined by his tittle. It made Feliciano miss his friend, as well as joy at being able to eradicate a law that would have taken Herakles away from Kiku, giving this couple the chance to be happy and be themselves. As he gazed over to Ludwig, chatting with another crew member, he was glad to have that chance as well.

Soon enough, perhaps they could be this revealing about their own love.

On the fourth morning, Ludwig and Feliciano were awakened with hastened calls to prepare as they would soon be entering the port of Setúbal. They didn't waste a second in going along with the commotion of the crew and helping in what they could, but because of their royal status, many refused to let them lift a single finger. Annoyed they were both, but at least they could relax by the railings as all kinds of items were brought on deck to prepare for disembarkation, watching even those of the White kingdom work along, to which Feliciano greeted in morning waves.

"Isn't it…odd…" Ludwig addressed.

"They already explained themselves to us. I don't think anything is wrong, if anything I think they came in just the right time," Feliciano saw.

"I know, I'm just wondering about how they managed to find the contact if they said they've been apart from the rest of the kingdoms for centuries."

"Your grandfather is king after all."

"I really don't think my grandfather is behind this," Ludwig was sure, as the wind that blew past him, as the waves that crashed against the boat.

"Are you saying…that the contact was not made by the crown?" Feliciano guessed as much, for a moment afraid, wondering what exactly was in control on bringing them Kandake, Abasi and their people, no matter how kind, hardworking or loyal they were to the cause.

"No…in fact…" Ludwig really began to question, his mind going through all kinds of events in their journey, the kind of people they met, how their meetings worked, where they stayed…he heavily doubted his grandfather would have permitted to spend his entire trip like that.

"I don't think a lot of the contacts made during this trip were done by my grandfather or grandmother. I think someone else is behind it." Ludwig didn't seem to budge at this, but Feliciano on the other hand quivered, fearing the worst, like he was being spied on by Khaos himself. He remembered those lecherous stares and shivered, bringing himself closer to Ludwig, his defense against any kind of sudden feeling of evil.

Those petite arms wrapped around his more powerful ones, that scent, that softness of his features and hair against them, it made any other thought melt away, leaving behind a smile, a blush, the grasp around him tight, protective, reassuring to defend against anything that ailed his beloved. They settled their gazes between them, ignorant to the commotion around them, the act of the sea, the coming mountains of their kingdom red, it couldn't be as impressive as this feeling of heat that made it shine brighter than even the sun that was strong above them.

Ludwig brought a hand to caress around Feliciano's jaw, pulling his face towards his, to focus, to promise as surely as he would from now on. "I doubt it's anything dangerous, and if it is, rest assured that I won't let it do anything to you." The determination in his voice did

enough for Feliciano to swoon, to redden beautifully in just the way that Ludwig couldn't resist, melting them more into their embrace.

"Wow, look at you two actually being adorable."

They had to be interrupted, but their movement away from each other was not this time harsh or embarrassed, they just rolled their eyes, Ludwig's arms wrapped well around Feliciano's waist, turning to João as he came down to the deck, his own bags in his hold. They were a lot for what they assumed a sailor who was going to continue his trips around the sea.

"What are all those bags for?" Feliciano asked.

João stared to those very items as if he just noticed, indifferent to their heavy weight, but then surprised at how they didn't immediately assume and knew.

"Lovino is going to bear soon, I want to be in Barga to meet my nephew," he told.

Feliciano perked and slapped a hand against his forehead, not believing that he had forgotten about his brother's soon reach to his birthing day.

"That's right! Ludwig! We must get them something! And we have to send letters to Berlin and let them know I want to stay to see my nephew too!" He excited, practically jumping in his spot, Ludwig feeling his utter glee in the tight hold he kept of his hand.

"We will." Anything to keep him glowing like this.

"You'll be coming with us then?" Feliciano wondered.

"Yeah, if it's not a problem."

"Of course not!"

Yet Ludwig's expression contorted. João to be added to that mixture of a surviving group from the white kingdom as well as the two main arising rulers of Hearts. He felt an incredible amount of weight and stress. It only worsened when he found out that Herakles and Sadiq were joining along as well. Sadiq apparently had to hand in some reports himself to the castle, as well as Herakles wanted to visit his great uncle in Barga and later Kiku in Berlin. Since they were heading the same direction, it was only best to join along. Feliciano on the other hand found it the most perfect thing, having some others to chat with endlessly, going on with anecdotes, drawings and even games that they insisted the arising king joined in on as well.

Ludwig never thought he'd see the day in which he would actually play cards with citizens of the white kingdom.

Four days of carriage riding through the Iberian province later, they finally made entrance into Italy. Feliciano couldn't sit still, pointing and glamorizing proudly to all their companions. It was endearing, no matter how members like Abasi rolled their eyes and groaned at such large amounts of energy at any time of day that they had to respond to if they didn't want to disappoint the young arising queen. Ludwig did not find himself with that

annoyance, he smiled happily, his mind in memories of their childhood about to be relived in their return.

That's right…Ludwig realized this was the first time he was coming to Barga since that goodbye nine years go. He gazed expectantly to the distance, with bumbling emotions, curious to any of the changes or perhaps how it remained.

This was a dear village, where Ludwig and Feliciano made their childhood and the initial of their friendship. After that year of watching that very friendship crumble to pieces, returning was yet another relief, another embrace to reconstruct as it had been those sunny and warm days of play and imagination.

They arrived a midafternoon, the village peeking in a perk from the distance, its beautiful glow enough to temp Feliciano in getting down from his carriage and running forward in his impatience. But just like in their childhood, this time Ludwig was rightfully there to hold his hand to avoid anything brash. Once they arrived at the leading bridge, Feliciano couldn't hold himself longer and he shot away from the carriage before it could properly stop. Ludwig's shout was lost, Feliciano was instead eager for the familiar heat, the ground under his footsteps and the all-around sound of his language in its naturality. In his meeting, in his contact, Feliciano found it all too silent, but a loving, familiar and all adoring sound changed all that in a running forward, wave, curls bouncing along with her excitement.

"Feliciano! Feliciano!" She called, already wide-open arms to his direction.

"Mamma!" He called in return and they met in their usual crashes, spin, speed talking and even jumping as they continued to turn. It was the sole thing to wonderfully witness as the rest came in their own cross, Ludwig losing his bother, the rest smiling, feeling from the reuniting mother and son warm welcome enough.

"Ah, Ludwig!" She called in turn once she noticed him, running towards him in the same excitement. Ludwig found himself joining along, even raising her in an elated spin that made her shriek shortly in surprise. Feliciano introduced his mother to the rest, only to Herakles and João familiar greetings, but joy in the new acquaintance she met. Of course, there was confusion in meeting a group of the White Kingdom, but Feliciano assured he would explain later in the villa. He made clear he and Ludwig had some important things to say, but it was better that they were all together with the family to hear it properly. A moment of anxiousness showed in Renata's expression, but as other wandering villagers noticed the just arriving presence, they all began joining along with their own greetings and welcome, eager for their own arising queen, distracting in new conversations and even festivity. Many were old friends that Ludwig and Feliciano had played with as kids, the children those Feliciano knew who wanted to meet Ludwig, elders who still remained, grabbing their cheeks, embracing and kissing with no difference, even coed as if they were the children from once before.

In the excitement, people brought out tables, chairs, magical items to show this new coming group, food, even instruments to play out. Ludwig and Feliciano suddenly found themselves in an unplanned feast, laughing, chatting to people of their past and having the amazing food the province was known for. And then the dancing began, all joining to make it seem like the buildings, the lanterns, even the stones were part of the spins and jumps. To Renata's

surprise, and those who knew how rocky Ludwig and Feliciano's relationship had been, Feliciano pulled Ludwig into the frenzy and the other had actually complied. No roll of the eyes, no grimace, his body moved as joyous as the rest of the villagers who participated. They all couldn't help the grins at the smiles the young royal couple shared, the new way their eyes connected, how they always returned to each other for another round after they took different partners, their dear holds, how their bodies did enough to whisper…well, their love. Many had questions, especially Renata, but they let them in their sways, in their relief of being home, of being brought back to more innocent and care free days.

Late into the night did things begin to simmer, thunder rolling in the distance, all hurrying to bring everything inside before the rain caught them. Renata offered them all stay at the Barga villa, but before Feliciano could agree, Ludwig had responded, "thank you, Renata, but Feliciano and I will be staying at my own villa." Feliciano had perked at this for he did not remember discussing this with Ludwig. Renata on the other hand smirked and even winked, not minding before she ushered the rest of the men ahead to follow her into the singular forest road that would take them to the villa.

Ludwig and Feliciano helped some in the last tidying before they settled their own route, dark, clouds heavy above them, the only two present, but not lonely, not quiet.

"I can't believe Mattia is still going on with his collection. I thought he would stop once he'd run out of space in his room."

"He makes them now, even sells them in a shop he owns. He has a whole new house just full of figurines." Feliciano expanded his arms, wanting Ludwig to understand the grandeur, laughing and jumping ahead, but always turning to make sure that Ludwig was keeping up since he was the one carrying most of their luggage.

"And do you still use this same route to get back to your villa?" Ludwig wondered, looking about, spotting pretty much the same things, perhaps a tree that grew taller, a gone patch, unfamiliar flowers, moved boulders or a new sign raised.

"Why would we need another one? This one is perfect enough." As prideful as if he had made the foundations.

"I guessed you would have found a shorter one," he shrugged.

"There isn't any other. I know it's expected of us to do something that will make us walk less but we do enjoy this route. There's so many pretty things and sometimes we see wild phoenixes or bug dragons." Feliciano petted Pookie on his shoulder as his eyes searched between the trees, to the distant hills and views wanting to catch a glimpse of any of these animals.

"Are there as many bug dragons as when we were kids?"

"Definitely, I think even more. I've spotted more and more nests."

Finally the King's villa was there. Not a change, all the same, to Ludwig in the exactitude of their last week so long ago. In that relief of an arrive was the instant that lighting and

thundered flashed, and sooner than they expected they were drenched in the sudden rain. Yet Feliciano found it a game, he laughed, he spun, accepting this new embrace of nature that he easily let befriend. Ludwig saw him a jewel, a beauty, he was left frozen not sure on how to deal with the view, but then Feliciano was off, surely getting cold, wanting shelter, running directly to the yard of the house in a playful frenzy. Ludwig ran behind him in the same playful manner hoping for a chance to catch him and declare himself victorious over some sudden game that was occurred silently. But after all, his arms were occupied with their things and Feliciano was just faster. Their reach was to the single gazebo in the front yard, a temporary ceiling while they could rest from the walk, breathe, Ludwig could settle their things on the floor and focus on the actual beauty the night possessed with the rain.

“Well, they kept this clean and new,” Ludwig realized as he gazed to the pillars, the form, the white wood still as shinning and pristine.

“Whenever I passed sometimes growing up, I saw the servants constantly cleaning. It made me think that your family was coming over for a visit."

“I wasn’t allowed to return here at all during the gap years.”

“I know…but I still kept hoping…I wanted whatever glance to see you.” Feliciano took a lean to the rail, his hand reaching out to continue to be pelted by the rain, finding it soothing as it fell down his arm. He was uncaring to the rest of the drench of his clothing, how his hair stuck down, it was just as comforting, all while Ludwig tried to dry in whatever movements he could. He gave up and simply settled closer to Feliciano, pacing around him, for now just looking at the surroundings and reminiscing.

“They’ve kept it pretty much the same.”

“Yeah, but see over there,” Feliciano pointed to a rainbow-colored ball still clear between some bushes.

“Oh gods, it’s still where we left it,” Ludwig couldn’t help but give out a small chuckle. “Not the best hiding spot.”

“We used to think so. Don’t you remember there used to be a unicorn bush here?”

“Yeah, what happened to it?”

“They had to cut it down after it was destroyed by a big storm.”

“At least the red roses are here.”

“They wouldn’t dare. Remember how we tried using them to make a chocolate tree,” Feliciano laughed.

“Pouring it in my mother’s potato batch and having her chase us to that wall."

“Wasn’t it the same one we tried to climb?”

“And you fell off and hurt your hand."

“I still have the scar.” Feliciano raised his hand proudly and Ludwig laughed along. “And there, we tried to make a football field."

“Yeah, not the best thing we made."

“We managed to play."

“Yeah…if we would have extended it to this side maybe Oppa wouldn’t have been so mad.”

“Either way he was going to get mad."

“We were always ruining his yard,” Ludwig sighted, the embarrassment he didn’t possess at the time reaching him now.

“But we did have fun,” Feliciano lighted.

“We did,” Ludwig had to agree.

Their eyes then suddenly fell in one spot, that one particular spot lightening only one memory. They both blushed instantly, holding to the rails they lay upon harshly, nervous, yet recalling how wonderful that small little moment had been.

“And there…” Feliciano dared to point, “you kissed me the first time.”

Silence, worrying, having Feliciano wonder if Ludwig even recalled it or just forced himself to forget it.

“I did,” he assured and yet the silence continued, the air tense between them, scared to any little movement, the rain only taunting, seeming to sing songs of mock kissing.

“It was…really nice,” Feliciano admitted, with such a heavenly chuckle Ludwig had to turn to him to watch, in the process landing his hands on either side of him, caging him to the rail, close, the rain and air now stopped to them as they instead focused on whatever movement and colors were shown in their expressions.

“I agree,” Ludwig whispered because in their proximity it was the softness needed, it went along with the intense glow in their eyes, the dust of their cheeks, the breath to tempt them closer.

Truly alone, nothing, not even the flashes of lightning enough to interrupt.

Ludwig let a hand caress at his back, Feliciano raising both his own to brush at his jaw, their bodies coming into a press, everything boiling, every rise occurring, and neither couldn’t take it, neither couldn’t hold it much longer. Finally, finally, finally, in a great relief that made them both want to sing did their lips meet again.

Why would they want to sing though? Why would they want to speak? Breathe? When instead their lips could move against each other in unbelievable velvet softness, a touch that ignited magic without spells or conjuring, one that came so naturally, so meant, so bended and made for the other. The power of an Ace, generational power, the universe, hell even the

hand of creation could not equate to this mingling of breaths, the smack and stronger press of their lips as they turned and moved for more, wanting the melody their bodies omitted to continue, nothing more than this song to add to the fall of rain.

It was more than what they imagined it would be growing up, it was more passionate and ready than their last, with surer emotions of love, of promise, of a romantic future they didn't have to be embarrassed about.

More, more and oh so much more did they want of this. They couldn't believe that at some point in their childhood this was not wanted, this was a sign of a growth they did not want to reach, but now they couldn't let go, now their arms wrapped around each other in a lock, in a try to never end, to never depart.

They couldn't recall how they headed inside, where they put their things or how they made their way up to Ludwig's old room. All they knew, all they could feel, was the sunk of the bed, Feliciano laying, Ludwig on top of him, gazing down to the shine of those bronze eyes, enough of an alight to keep the room bright, to keep the passion igniting.

Ludwig dived for more of those kisses, tangling himself in that body as he had dreamed, those arms wrapped strongly around him, caressing, joining back in the kisses with the same ferocity. Legs became entangled, the heat they reached enough of a blanket, hands tingling across expanses of backs, arms, Ludwig teasing across his legs, lips against the meet of neck. The moan Feliciano gave out was a clearance of what they were doing, of the limits they had to remain in, especially when they were still sharing their first kisses, inexperience, nervous, and the reminder of a vow all rulers should go through. They eased, enough love was exchanged in the hold they decided to maintain, wrapped to each other, Ludwig taking delightful scents, Feliciano cradled and having Ludwig's heartbeat to drum along.

These were to be their nights from now on, accepting, all so rightfully defeated, deserving. It was with that knowledge that they smiled into their sleep.

The morning beam was intense, enough of a burn to get them both stirring. Ludwig extended his hand as if to stop the rays from entering more, Feliciano groaned into Ludwig's arm, just accepting and not minding it. In a turn they met, not a dream, not in Khaos's castle, but in Barga, in the royal villa, even more specific in the comfort of Ludwig's room, right after sharing such a monumental kiss. They chuckled in greeting, nearing and taking that sweetness of their lips again, and again, and again. They just fell back into the bed and continued that frenzy, wrapped as they had been during the night, but now moving and pulling apart the sheets and pillows.

"Shouldn't we-shouldn't we-" Ludwig kept letting himself be interrupted by every peck Feliciano crashed, his mind blank every time for the fire of the sensation.

"Should we what?" Feliciano smiled and teased, each time pulling Ludwig down with just the softness of his lips.

“We-were supposed to head to the Valenti villa. We have to tell them and we have to see your brother about his bearing,” Ludwig reminded, just enough for Feliciano to freeze, a mixture of nervousness and excitement, but he nodded in understanding, reluctantly having to stand and start in their new dressing. Yet they escaped every kiss they could, Feliciano playful, swooping in from the most unexpected places as they made their way about the home to get their breakfast.

The day was hot, but yet clear and beautiful, birds chirping and flying about, Ludwig and Feliciano running behind them down the route just as they would do as kids. Soon enough the villa came into view, Ludwig holding back, releasing a heavy breath in taking, bombarded with all kinds of very sweet memories.

“Home,” Feliciano whispered and ran forward, taking Ludwig’s hand to make him hurry. He already wanted to be draped in its cool, wanted to greet, wanted to spend another day of his normal, of his old routine away from royal decrees and ruling responsibilities.

As he expected, when he entered, the feel was if as he had never left, never changing and already a knowing welcome. Ludwig felt the same, not bothering to hide the light his face took. Old servants came shouting and Feliciano brought them to the usual Valenti embrace and jump, going on unintelligibly, worsening once Renata came down and joined in. It only halted once they noticed the new tall and demeaning presence. It took a while for them to recognize the prince, hesitant as they reached him, not sure how to greet him after so many years. He wasn’t that young shy and playful boy anymore, he was now a man to be king and already he shined as imposing. They were between hugging him and coddling him as they used to or bowing and speaking in their most respectful tone.

“Can you keep it down! All this shouting is making my head spin faster for fuck’s sake,” Lovino exasperated, making his way down to meet with his brother and the arising king… much to his annoyance and Antonio’s insistence.

As expected, there was growth in his symbols as proof of his bearing. Artistic red lines decorated almost like movement across his visible areas, but Ludwig and Feliciano knew of the potency they must be growing under his clothing. A red jewel on his forehead showcased not only his proximity to bearing, but the octagonal long shape showed that he was to bring a boy. Ludwig had to hold a hand on Feliciano’s shoulder so he wouldn’t jet forward that instant and just drown Lovino with more irritation.

“Lovi, baby, little Ángel is listening to you,” Antonio followed right behind.

“We’re not naming him that! And he can listen all he wants! Better he learns his insults from me than from somebody else,” he seemed proud, making his way to Feliciano, with an actual smile, arms open, and Feliciano dived right into it, with laughter and spins, making Lovino nauseated.

“Oh Aces, I’m so excited, so excited, so excited! How has it been? Have there been any complications? When are you scheduled to bear? I swear to you I would stay whatever long just so I can see my nephew! Are you really going to name him Ángel? I was just going to suggest Romano, well…now that I think about it, maybe it’s best I suggest Emilio, but I’m sure whatever you have in mind will be wonderful."

“Slow down! You’re going to make me feel worst!” Lovino was at the point of fainting with all these words. Luckily Antonio was there to hold him if anything. “It’s been fine. He’ll be arriving healthy in about four days."

“Four days!” Feliciano shouted.

“Stop screaming!” Lovino in turn shouted, which only added to his queasiness. “Okay, I need to get back to my room, Toni, tell João to bring me a piece of that potato pie from yesterday,” Lovino asked quite calmly.

“I thought you hated potatoes,” Feliciano raised an eye.

“It’s what the baby fucking wants. You dare think I would eat garbage otherwise,” Lovino rolled his eyes beginning his leave.

“And hey, where’s nonno?”

The room instantly soured.

There was an uncomfortable silence as they lead the two visitors through the halls, preferring this quiet over having to explain, Renata reigning it as she decided it was just best to show them. They arrived before his knowing room, his daughter knocking quite gently.

“You-can can-co-ca-come in,” the voice kept coughing, it was almost unintelligible, every one more a blow to the woman, making it harder for her to remain with an indifferent expression.

She opened and gave first entrance to Feliciano, who instantly shivered at the concentrated freeze that was placed in the room surely by enchanted crystals. Ludwig came after him, offering himself as some shield from it, over him, protective. Renata grinned, Vicenzo was confused and Augustus laughed, which only caused another fit of coughs.

Despite it being the late morning, Augustus was still dressed in sleeping wear, pillows offering a seating, his bedside desk and other surfaces covered in all kinds of colorful tubes… as well as bloodied cloths that made Feliciano tremble at the kind of implication it meant.

“Bambino!” He wanted to greet as gigantic as ever, but he cringed at the movement he gave his arms, landing one arm on the bed, the other on an open book.

Zuma, one who came with the White Kingdom group, was offering Augustus some kind of lecture, the rest present, enjoying from whatever reading had taken place, standing as strong and almost like guardians to the sick man.

“No-nonno.” Feliciano hadn’t hope to greet him like this again, to tremble as he had done that castle welcome, slow, same hesitations, but still wanting the same warm and strong embrace as always. The journey had indeed strengthened him, for this time he didn’t submit himself under the tears, he smiled and embraced back just as Augustus wanted.

No, his strength wasn’t there anymore, but his warmth, his being, were more than enough and were still capable of exchanging their love.

“Did you get more muscle?” Augustus chuckled as he felt the hardening in Feliciano’s arms.

“Really?” And Feliciano padded his body all completely, wanting this to be the case.

“Maybe I’ve just gotten weaker,” Augustus admitted with a hurtful smile.

“No, no, no, may-maybe I got gotten stronger instead, I mean, I did do a lot of things in the journey,” Feliciano excited.

“I’ve heard. Gave me quite the heart attacks,” Augustus laughed as he lightly padded on his chest.

“You told him?” Feliciano asked the group.

“No, we were just reading to him some exercises for his breathing,” Kandake said.

“Everything he heard and learned was from mere words and letters the castle would send,” Abasi filled.

“Nothing really complete,” Zuma assured, he had gone through the letters himself. “You still have to tell them as we planned.”

“Tell us what?” Augustus questioned as he was then interrupted by a strange creature flying above him. “Is this…is this a St. Mark cub?” Augustus was still as friendly, petting the small creature, who purred as he took his flight around the warm and comforting hand.

“Well…” before Feliciano could explain, light engulfed Pookie, growing, growing, until there was a large winged lion sitting by the bed, and despite his surprise and slight fear, Augustus continued with his petting and Pookie with his purring.

“He’s Pookie, Fabius’s son, who was Augusta’s St. Mark. He was sent to me by the Aces.”

It was just the words to halt Augustus, widening his expression into questioning, suddenly petrified and fearful that any kind of movement now would be an insult to this powerful creature…or waiting for Feliciano to laugh and admit it a joke. When the silence continued, when Feliciano looked heavily fretful, Augustus knew he was going to say something that would be the largeness of this very lion…or more.

“Have everyone here. There’s something you all need to know about our family.”

Chapter 54

Chapter Notes

> As always, I apologize for my lateness. Since most of you I assume don't follow my tumblr and I as well wasn't posting anything in snapchat, I announce here that over an emergency I had to return to Puerto Rico and thus stopping my trip around Europe. To make matters worst, in the trajectory and the drastic change of weather, I caught Pneumonia, spent a week in the hospital and recently had to go back over a complication. So yes, sorry for not posting anything in snapchat, as well as for the time it took me to post. Since I'm back in PR and won't be returning to Europe until August, I will have more time to write so you MIGHT have quicker updates for now...perhaps. I do still have to go to the doctor and tomorrow actually I have to go to the clinic to get blood samples for my next appointment. These kinds of things will be the hindering for now. I will go back to posting in snapchat soon and alerting as I always do. Patience I continue to ask and I hope that you enjoy this chapter!

Foreboding silence, the only sound that of the freezing spell blowing its occasional spark, not enough to break the stillness, not enough for all the Valenti there to depart from what their thoughts dedicated to after hearing such a large story and news.

Augusta had been the true hero of their lineage, a lineage full of power, with an Ace, with an important destiny lying in their own Feliciano. No movement, sometimes it felt like not even breaths were exchanged, as frozen as figures in a painting.

“Uh…” Augusto uttered the first sound after the telling and yet the rest feared to join along in saying something.

“I need a glass of wine,” Vincenzo groaned, rubbing his hands on his temple from the growing headache.

“I need a whole bottle…maybe more,” Lovino uttered, tempted, his hand reaching as if to command a servant.

“No,” Antonio denied him by bringing his hand down. Lovino was bearing after all.

“Yeah…that’s…what I had to tell you,” Feliciano said afterwards, still trembling, slightly fearful of the new image his family would have of him afterwards.

“An Ace…an Ace…” Renata repeated, still in the same shock as everybody else.

“And a war coming soon," Lovino did well to remind.

“With a who knows how big dark monster whose been angry and vengeful for centuries,” Vincenzo added.

“And Feli to do the same thing Augusta had done long ago and save us all,” Lovino said in a heavy tone of doubt that made a new shiver run through Feliciano, head looking down with the usual fears. Ludwig placed a comforting hand on his shoulder, bringing him close, the rest too preoccupied in their thoughts after the news to smirk or point at Ludwig and Feliciano’s sudden new closeness.

“I’m confident Feliciano will do just that,” Ludwig declared, his sureness as strong as stone. And just like that there was light and color, Feliciano could smile, and he could feel confident, showing that very strength to his family now.

“And what are we to do?” Renata asked.

“Remain here and stay safe,” Feliciano wanted.

“Oh, no, no, no, no,” Lovino pointed excessively.

“What do you have in mind?” It was like Ludwig was challenging them.

“Fight, of course,” Vincenzo was sure.

“No!” Feliciano would not allow his family to risk themselves like this.

“The kingdom needs every hand,” Renata was defending, standing in her sureness to join along.

“Please…” still Feliciano wanted to stop.

“Whatever army you're making, we want to be a part of it,” Antonio decided.

“Lovino! Your baby-”

“Will stay in the castle safely.”

Feliciano was confused with the implications it meant. “Does that mean…”

“Antonio and I will go with you to the castle once you return,” Lovino declared.

“But-but-but-”

“We’ll train along and hey, you can spend a lot of time with your nephew as well.” Lovino knew Feliciano’s soft spot for babies and children.

“I believe this to be just,” Abasi added.

“Don’t-don’t-”

“Renata and I wish to be updated in all the training done. We will do what we can here and join you in the castle when it’s time,” Vincenzo made his own decision, one his wife agreed

with.

Feliciano fretted, feeling ignored, worried, stressed.

“Your highness, you have to understand,” Kandake defended.

“You have said it yourself, we need every help possible,” Abasi added.

“I just…I don’t want to loose any of you…” on the verge of his usual tears.

“You won’t,” Vincenzo made clear.

“We will train well,” Renata came forward and caressed Feliciano’s jaw, enough to stop any tears that could fall, placing a gentle kiss on his forehead. “Just as we won’t doubt in your strength, don’t doubt in ours,” she eased, placing yet another kiss before she let go, suddenly switching her attention and gaze to the arising king. “Ludwig, why don’t you come and help along with the cooks to make lunch?”

“Don’t you think we’re better off-”

“After this, we need good food, and didn’t you promise you will be an expert in cake baking by now? Something sweet will be nice to add.” That was just the persuasion that had Ludwig easily falling, compliant in the grasp Renata took of his arm, pulling him off into the halls.

“I need to get out of this room, I need…fresh air,” Lovino needed more space for his thoughts…as well as just wind to refresh him. He was feeling hot and this discovery just made it worst.

“May we come with you?” Zuma offered.

“We have some calming spells for bearers that we want to try out,” Kandake seemed excited about it.

“Oh good, do you have something for sore skin?”

“I believe so,” Kandake was assuring, all leaving with the expecting couple.

Vincenzo also took his turn to leave to get some medical drinks, as well as curiosity over why his wife took Ludwig to the kitchen, sensing gossiping…that he wanted a part of.

Augusto and Feliciano found themselves alone, both holding the same smiles that ignited like the very candles.

“I suppose you will want to join the war as well,” Feliciano smirked, knowing how Augusto had once been a proud soldier of the Hearts Kingdom army.

“If I didn’t have my condition, I would be the first to sign, before anybody else.” He was sure, a strong wish even as he lay back down into the bed, taking easy breaths and finally at some sort of ease after the news. Feliciano took sitting in one of the near chairs, joyous enough in just sitting by him, letting the silence live on longer and being content to just

remain as they were. But one of the many things Feliciano had gotten from Augusto was how talkative he could get.

“You know, my mother was always going on with conspiracy theories about Augusta. Always believed something was going on when there was barely any information about her, especially since she was the wife of what we thought was our greatest hero. She would suggest that perhaps she never existed, or that she was Romulus’s daughter instead, that she was the real builder of the castle, perhaps another man’s wife, all her information burned in jealousy. Then there was my favorite, where she said she was the real hero who fought against Khaos, going on with incredible tales that made it impossible for me to sleep as a child. I never thought she would be right and now more than ever, I’m glad the namesake she gave me.” There was such fulfillment, a childish happiness that for a moment made him look younger and healthier.

“Really?”

“Yes. My father wanted Romulus, but Mamma was insisting. How she managed, I have no idea, but thus Augusto was chosen, for even if she birthed a male she would not give up on the name.” He laughed, but it wasn’t long lasting, a new kind of nostalgia falling in his gaze, his eyes far in another moment.

“Hopefully I’ll soon be able to see her and tell her this,” he sighed.

“What are you talking about? She’s been dead for several years.”

Augusto only hummed, with another sigh and then a groan for another pang of pain that spread through him.

“So…Ludwig?” Still Augusto managed to smirk in such a way that instantly dipped Feliciano in red.

“Wha-wha-what about him?” Feliciano looked away, rubbing his arm and only resonating well what had happened.

Augusto’s smirk did not fall and in his seating, he seemed to lean, wanting to hear.

“Something happened, something happened,” Augusto sing-song, then a laugh that Feliciano just had to face even in his embarrassment.

Smiling and laughing all his strength even in his sickness, it was beauty as well as inspiration to Feliciano.

“Okay, so, yes, something…did happen,” Feliciano admitted as much, but Augusto’s smile just turned wider, once again bringing Feliciano into red, trying to hide it by groaning and sinking his face into the palm of his hands.

“I want details, zuccherino!” He expected.

After some tugging on his hair, some easy breathing, gathering the confidence and organizing in his head where to begin, he began to tell.

“-this amount of chocolate is just enough, but I think we should add more blueberries. Renata?”

To be honest, Renata didn’t give a care, the cupcakes were nothing to her when she was trying to focus on her mission.

“So…” she leaned upon the counter, tangling her hands, a mischievous smirk already placed like an instant mask. “Tell me, how are things with Feliciano?”

Ludwig suddenly squeezed too hard and had stained chocolate unto the counter. “I-I’m sorry about…that,” he apologized.

“Not to worry, nothing that can’t be managed.” Renata fetched for a cloth and cleaned it herself, hoping for Ludwig to say something in the meantime, but he remained as shy as he had been in his childhood, wary to even pick up the plastic and continue with the frosting.

“What’s the matter?” Renata asked, as sweet and motherly as ever.

“I’m guessing that’s the real reason you brought me here,” Ludwig chuckled.

“This is my son, I want him to feel loved, especially by you.” Good sign enough that Ludwig was smiling back.

“Is he getting loved?” Renata thought it easy to start.

“Yes.” As devoted, as sure, no sign of doubt or lies in that simple reply. “I finally am, as we promised, as I always wanted and it feels…amazing that we can be like this, that I can love him, show it and act as he deserves to be. He’s just as wonderful to me, it feels so great to accept all his embraces, holds, touches, kisses-”

“Kisses…touches?” Renata grinned wide and oh how cute Ludwig’s pale turned deep red.

“We kind of kissed for the first time…yesterday.”

Renata shrilled, holding to Ludwig’s arm and jumping more like a little girl. “How was it? How did it happen and where?” She would have gone on if Ludwig didn’t continue speaking.

“We were returning from the village, it started raining so we went under the gazebo just to talk and…I don’t know it just…happened. It was…like something exploded into a lot of colors and all I wanted was just…more and more of it.”

How relieving, how wonderful for Renata to hear.

“Really, and what else?” A new voice, coming and taking a seating with ease.

Vincenzo was a tall dark man, as built as Ludwig, sometimes intimidating, but Ludwig had never found fear in him…until that moment.

Sure, afterwards they didn't do anything far beyond the lines of intimacy, but the fact that Feliciano was still brought to his bed, where they shared more passionate kisses, his lips upon his neck and that very, very, very delightful single moan that made him question how in the world did he not continue to ravish what he had so splendidly under him…made him think he had done already a heinous deflowering that Vincenzo saw clearly on his figure, more so when he remained silent, frozen and surely sweating and blushing in nervousness.

"We slept in different beds…clothed."

Vincenzo and Renata glanced between themselves confused.

"That's rather…abstinent," Vincenzo commented with deep question.

"Yes, yes, because it is the right thing to do. We have to be diligent, focus, strong, organized."

"Mamma, papa, nonno wants porridge, he told me there's one-"

"Feliciano!" And there was a ruckus as Ludwig accidentally swung his hand over the blueberry package, the flour, the sugar, the chocolate, the butter, all swung sent flying. He tried to catch, he tried to stop anything from hitting harsh ground or being sent somewhere else in the counter, but it had been a failure, and in the process he had almost tripped and probably got a new bruise by hitting something against the edge of the counter. Trying to maintain decency, he tried to keep a cool lean, acting like the disaster around him he caused was nonexistent.

"Porridge, porridge, porridge! I don't know where it is! Renata, tell him where the porridge is."

The baffles everyone held intensified and there was hesitation to make any movement that would make Ludwig act more like a sudden fool.

"It's here, carino." Renata went to get the bowl and handed it to him, but Feliciano remained still after having in its hold, mostly worried over his arising king.

"Ludwig…are you okay?"

"Fine, fine, fine, why would you be asking?" How cute he blushed, the wonder in his eyes, taken absolutely by his arising queen. Feliciano smiled at such a truth of emotion.

"Luddy, why don't we dine with nonno in his room tonight?"

"Ye-yeah, yeah sure, I see no problem with that."

Feliciano skipped away in big elation.

Afterwards, the only thing left were the last chuckles of Vicenzo and Renata, then leaving the topic and determined on finishing the lunch as well as the blueberry and chocolate cupcakes.

What Augusto thought would be a dinner to focus on speaking to Ludwig and probably slapping him as payback for how he treated Feliciano after their reunion, ended up with a family dinner in his room, including a Greek nephew, a Turkish sailor, a Portuguese relative of Antonio and a mysterious group from what was thought the lost kingdom of white. It was loud, there was endless laughter, and how wonderful to see Ludwig and Feliciano sitting together, smiling to each other, sharing pieces of food, even leaning against one another, Ludwig's arms around his waist, Feliciano poking Ludwig's nose and even nuzzling to it. It made him laugh…they were being that annoying couple that as children they had spoken of never wanting to be. Pookie still remained in his bed, in his tiny form this time, purring and cuddling into Augusto's hand, the old man enjoying from the small creature, not minding to continue with his caresses. Herakles and Sadiq were at the verge of fighting again, but a handing of the cupcakes Ludwig had made had stilled them instantly. The rest of the attention was on Lovino, who was showing some of his red lined marks on his arm to Kandake, checking to see if the baby would arrive with sickness or defect. To the relief of many, she had given them the positive news of expecting a very healthy baby.

How beautiful, how perfect this painting he ruled upon. Helena would be so proud of them all, and it was moments like these that made him miss her deeply. Soon, perhaps…soon.

It was a kind of repeat for the next few days, all expecting the soon birth of…name that was still being fought upon. They all cleaned, cooked, baked, even helped out in the fields, cutting grass, gathering some of the grapes for either wine or just to eat at the moment. It was rather blissful, a vacation, sunny days with laughter and enjoyment.

It was a beautiful afternoon like this, windows open letting a delightful breeze refresh all the halls, bringing in quite a lighting of the inner colors to make even the site rest. No one dared to ruin it with words, Ludwig and Feliciano silent as they ordered and packed some of the fruits just brought. They had this room alone, the rest either working outside or preparing the kitchen, leaving it silent enough to think that they had all the villa to themselves. Feliciano hummed some random tune, Ludwig content with listening to him as he worked. The humming then took a familiar tune, one of utter importance that Ludwig couldn't miss, his peeling in a halt, ears focused to listen on its completeness. To a surprise, Ludwig began humming along, his loud, breaking, bringing Feliciano to that same stillness he had taken for a moment to listen to him. Their gazes met, the idea reaching them instantly, bringing a dear smile, but yet there was still some shyness, some fear, and Lovino, as he gazed through a crack in the door, couldn't stand it.

"What are you doing?" Antonio asked him, meeting him as he made his way from upstairs with Augusto's empty plates from breakfast.

"Do you remember that small music chest we gave Feliciano for his Berlin departure?" Lovino instantly asked.

"Yeah, what about it?"

"Help me look for it," Lovino decided, leading Antonio forward.

“Wh-why? Wouldn’t it be in the king’s villa with all the rest of his stuff anyways?”

“Feliciano brings a bag every day from that place, perhaps it’s in there.”

“He mostly just brings spices and flowers.”

“You’ve clearly forgotten how sentimental my brother is.”

To Antonio’s surprise and Lovino’s correctness, they found the chest tucked well inside a handkerchief. It was a bit scrapped and dirtied, but it showed proof of use, of nights held in the hand of the arising queen, for the turmoil, for the relieving, for the hold of light in darkness. Both Antonio and Lovino were gleeful about this, remembering how much it had cost to get it made. At least Feliciano had been fruitful with it.

“Come on,” Lovino commanded them both back to the room, where now Ludwig and Feliciano had gone back to their usual peeling, but silent. The fear had won this time, but Lovino wasn’t going to let it continue. In that moment Renata was making her way down to meet them, catching Lovino opening the chest to begin the melody. This became the new only presence, both Ludwig and Feliciano perking in an instantaneous that almost seemed comical to those who watched by the door. The melody went on, having both the figures stilled, but nothing else occurred. When Lovino was at a verge of patience, Ludwig this time initiated the humming, going along with his peeling, then placing, true to the lullaby of the chest, like a normality not to question, but yet Feliciano remained in a haze, wondering if it was happening, if this could just be a dream. He feared to disturb it, his figure slumped, given up to the song.

“I’ll journey and see beyond the lines of our kingdom,
Never a fear to be lost, never a fear to fall,
In pleasure, I will take the mysteries of what I could meet,
If you accept to be mine, my Queen.”

Ludwig began, slowly, still as hesitant, the strength of his voice still evident, clearly not as melodic. He knew he couldn’t sing that well, yet he tried. To Feliciano it was blissful enough, breathless at that last phrase that Ludwig had sang with such strong meaning that he might as well whispered it close in his ear.

“No heat, no cold, will stop me of my search,
No sun, no rain to go against my strength,
Just promise me your hand,
And love me in our eternity.”

Ludwig turned fully to Feliciano by now, close, the fruits now fallen in their heap, a hand reaching to take his, which Feliciano instantly grasped wanting to show that very promise.

“My sun, my moon, my land, my love,
I know it’s a journey you will overcome,
But I don’t need you to go so far,
I want you here to kiss me.”

Feliciano so easily picked up the melody along in the continuing harmony, his voice clearly more pristine and enchanting for Ludwig to take his turn to be as breathless. Feliciano stood, pulling Ludwig to do the same, moving them forward in a familiar starting that the taller could not deny.

“Would you want all the gold I will find for you?
Would you like the songs I will bring from afar for you?
Would you accept me as your shield?
And would you want me always by your side?”

And they began dancing, Ludwig’s voice as frivolous as the spins, as the jumps, as the holds with magic to spread across the room, the viewers by the door not being able to hold down any smiles.

“I don’t want any of the riches you will bring,
I don’t care for any of the songs,
I only want you to hold,
I only want your arms around me.”

Feliciano continued, the song now strong on their heads, more powerful than even the melody that still rang from the chest. Their hold together as they swayed across the remained tight, yet free enough to expand their dance and imagine a feast of their own.

“Bring me your love, your kisses, your loyalty,
Your passion, your hope, your defeat,
Your promise, your weakness, your strength,
I will keep it all in my heart.”

By this time, Antonio, Lovino and Renata couldn’t hold themselves, they had come in, clapping along and laughing, Feliciano and Ludwig not minding it at all, it didn’t stop their own array of joy.

“I’ll journey and see beyond the lines of our kingdom,
Never a fear to be lost, never a fear to fall,
In pleasure, I will take the mysteries of what I could meet,
If you accept to be mine, my King.”

And with one last flourishing spin Ludwig had taken Feliciano in, practically screaming the last bits of the song, they finished, yet still laughing, with shinning glows in their expression that the rest joined them in.

Excited gibberish sprung in the air, the euphoria still too intense to really focus on proper words and communication, instead settling with these claps and the continuing laughter that kept the room beautifully alight.

“That was beautiful,” Renata complimented.

“It was just like old times!” Antonio added.

“I never thought I would actually get excited over watching you too be so sappy with each other,” Lovino said.

Feliciano and Ludwig were still too happy to really comment on their presence, they continued to answer with laughter, giggles, even blushes.

“You have to come, quickly!” It was all interrupted with the sudden crash entrance of Kandake, worried, fretting, even sweating with sudden harsh labor.

It stilled all like ice.

“What’s wrong?” Renata asked.

“It’s Augusto!”

In a rush, they all found themselves in the upper areas of the house where his room was located. They met a scene of surrounding people, most those of the White Kingdom, along with a doctor and nurse from the village, and some of the servants.

“It’s not working!”

“He still can’t breathe!”

“Signore Valenti, we need you to lay down!”

“I need more towels!”

“Pass me the Jairus potion!”

They all fretted and shouted.

Renata and Lovino were quick to join the group, trying their best to calm their shaking, sweating and breathless father and grandfather. Ludwig went to help with the extra towels they needed, and Feliciano…was petrified. He couldn’t find his movements, everything around him moving like a blur, the lost look in his grandfather’s eyes one of the most terrifying things he had seen in his life, keeping him in his unsureness of what to do.

“Feliciano! Come on!” His brother’s desperate shout was enough of a shake to bring back reaction to the arising queen. He quickly joined the rest in trying to calm the man by rubbing the pain away, putting potions and medicines, using the towels to clean the heavy sweat or to just get him to talk or calm down.

They ended up using a very strong and difficult tranquilizing spell, the only one of the countless that managed to bring calm to the old man, settling him back into a heavy rest, yet still looking pained with every released breath. They all remained close and attentive, as if holding still to the fretting body, waiting for the continuation. When minutes passed on and the room took dreaded silence, some of the servants, even the nurse, thought it well to depart, leaving the doctor, Abasi and Kandake to watch over Augusto, still doing their check up over what just happened. The rest, still shaken and anxious remained in the distance, silent

between themselves, their hands either rubbing harshly over the other or patting one's back to ease.

Done and sure, the three healers turned towards the family, their expressions showing a downcast and held words that the family knew were to pierce and destroy.

"What…. what happened?" Renata spoke out the question that all held.

The three looked among themselves, silently deciding who was going to word the answer, Kandake taking a deep breath and moving forward to speak.

"Augusto lost energy…a lot of energy, enough to loose his breath, to weaken his brain, his heart, lungs and many other organs in his body. Many things are starting to become unresponsive and it is only spreading throughout." She was afraid to continue with the rest, especially when she spotted the watering in Renata's eyes. "It's…the final stage of his sickness."

It was the sharp pain like needles to make them realize and react, what weakened their legs, what brought the tears and the despair to their hearts.

"Final stage…fi-final stage?" Feliciano questioned through the reddening and the tears beginning their fall over his cheeks.

This would be the hardest part to say.

"I'm sorry, but he's now going through something natural we cannot go against, a point where there's nothing we can do…but prepare."

"Prepare? Prepare for what?" Lovino was reaching exasperation even with his own tears.

Kandake knew that this was the moment she had to be clear. "He's dying."

Chapter 55

Chapter Notes

> As usual, I apologize for taking my time. Many issues, but nothing I can't handle. I am cured of my pneumonia, I got a new job for now, but I still got some time to write. Hope you enjoy!
>
> Warning: This chapter has a character death as well as a funeral.

"There's really… nothing that can be done?" Lovino still wanted to hope, wanted to believe.

"I'm sorry, but we have tried everything," Kandake assured, the very tragedy reaching and bringing her into the same melancholy of the family.

"How long?" Renata dared, her gaze now glued to her father.

Kandake gave a heavy sigh, "one or two days."

Renata trembled, a shaking so intense that Vicenzo had to come over and hold her dearly, offering himself as a place to cry the weakness of the moment.

"We'll…leave to give you privacy," the doctor finally uttered.

"We'll also be working on all the necessary for a funeral. You all need to be there for what's left of his time," Abasi said in the weakest they had heard his tone in.

Not a word, not an expression, the three decided on passing by and heading out, shutting the door to leave their moment there.

No one knew what to say, how to act, how to even move. They all remained in a deep unsureness with only their sobs as the only communication of their sorrow.

Ludwig had brought the two cups of hot chocolate into one of the largest terraces in the villa. It was where they had found a tranquil sitting the next morning after the devastating news that hadn't brought any kind of calm to Feliciano, his figure laying as dejected, face buried in his hands, trying to block anything else that could remind. Even as Ludwig placed the cups and took his own sitting, he didn't budge. The mist of the drink raised and danced all around the brunet in surely a sweet aroma that in any other situation would have been quickly devoured by the man, but in such despair, it didn't instill a breath.

“Um…Signora Maestri made it, said she used your favorite chocolate,” Ludwig wanted to excite him, but it only managed for Feliciano to depart his hands, revealing red eyes and cheeks, an inhale as he tried to calm his last outburst of tears. Hesitantly he went for his cup, taking but a tiny sip. He gave a short little smile, the taste too good to deny even in his sorrow.

“You should try it yourself, Ludwig. Signora Maestri never disappoints,” he said, noticing how Ludwig only kept his gaze on him, not giving his own cup a touch.

Glad that Feliciano was smiling if slightly for now, Ludwig indulged in his own, admitting that it was amazing. Feliciano emptied his quickly, everything it did to cheer gone, the sadness returning and slumping him to the same state Ludwig had found him in.

The wonderful taste was not as strong as his worry.

Ludwig extended his hand to join with the one Feliciano had against the side of his face, tightly so Feliciano wouldn’t dare let go, caressing, Feliciano lulling to that touch, even turning to place a dear kiss on those pale hands. Ludwig couldn’t stop the chuckle.

“I talked to Kandake.” Feliciano’s hold became more dear, tighter, wanting to remain with some holding to dream and paradise as he told of misfortunes.

Ludwig sigh, “Feliciano… we talked about this. I really don’t think it’s something you should interrupt.” Ludwig let his other hand lay on the table for Feliciano’s other to grab in the same brushes.

“But Ludwig… aren’t I an Ace? Don’t I hold the hand of creation? Shouldn’t…shouldn’t it be easy for me to just…bring him back to full health,” Feliciano hoped.

“Despite that, it’s still wrong to go against something that is bound and sure. If it’s his time, it's his time, and we should let him depart-”

“Kandake told me the same thing…and she said I couldn’t anyways. She told me our end dates are all predetermined by the Aces and no other can go against it…even another Ace.”

Ludwig could feel Feliciano’s saddening and drop in his grasp, and so Ludwig tried to make his caresses more prominent to distract him in the lull enough, but such a thing was impossible in the circumstances.

In this embrace they remained, the coming footsteps unheard until they reached the tile of the terrace.

“Your highnesses…” came Zuma’s soft voice, yet with strong announcement. Both instantly raised their heads towards him, their souls already clenching for the worst.

“Your grandfather has awakened. They have asked for both your presence.”

They sighed in acceptance, taking some last strengthening breaths before they stood and headed to that room full of heavy emotions they secretly dreaded to get into once again.

Vincenzo and Antonio remained seated by the entrance, talking silently between themselves, offering small waves of greeting once they noticed Ludwig and Feliciano enter. Augusto was indeed awake, proof in the width of his eyes, staring at a wall with an ounce of shock that made Feliciano understand that he had been told. Renata and Lovino were the only ones that stood near him, slightly trembling, both wanting to keep their composure in front of him.

“Ah, Feli, you’re here,” he greeted, a cheerful smile, sitting proudly and hiding well what was slowly consuming him. Feliciano questioned how he could move forward without shedding a single tear, exchanging instead the usual smile they shared.

Ludwig decided on staying behind with Vincenzo and Antonio, thinking it a moment that should be left for them.

Once Feliciano reached the bed, he leaned forward, and without hesitation, he dove into his embrace, taking in that protective scent, the weakening arms around him, even the kisses that laid against his curls.

“Feliciano…” Lovino began to scold.

“Oh let him, I don’t mind,” Augusto retorted, keeping his caresses, for a moment imagining he was holding that baby boy from long ago.

The smile he bore was too beautiful for Renata or Lovino to deny any longer.

As he seemed to lull Feliciano into the naps of his infancy, Augusto switched his gaze over to Lovino, offering a space as if to do the same with him. Lovino did come close, even sat on the bed, but refused to be babied as Feliciano easily accepted. Augusto still reached a hand to traverse through his own curls, scratching in all the places he knew Lovino had loved as a kid. It earned a deep smile, one that looked more adoring on his face than his constant pout. But just like it came, it began to fall, because Augusto could come to only one realization as he gazed to the markings and jewels around Lovino’s skin.

“Seems like I won’t be able to see your son.” It was a breaking to both, Lovino taking the hand that was caressing him to hold tightly as a way to hold himself from falling into weak tears.

“I’m sure you will, you’ll find your way from the heavens.” Lovino tried to keep things alight, Augusto chuckling.

“You’re right. That boy will be so beautiful, I will not be able to miss it.”

“Most beautiful boy in all four kingdoms?” Renata wondered.

“All Valenti always are!” And they all laughed.

“In fact, Feliciano, I’m already telling you.” He turned to him, Feliciano raising his head to listen. “Whatever you bear, will also be one of the most beautiful things in all four kingdoms, got that?”

“Of course, nonno,” Feliciano chuckled, also trying to hide a blush at the idea of bearing what would surely be Ludwig’s and his heirs. “But…you don’t know if I will be bearing…”

“I’m just telling you if anything, you never know. Which reminds me, Ludwig, why are you so far from me? Come over here!” It was almost like a scold. Ludwig couldn’t believe he would have strength for that, that he could just sit with all his power, a finger bringing him forward easily.

Like a soldier standing before his captain, Ludwig took the standing of a pillar, expressing every ounce of respect and admiration. Augusto rolled his eyes but didn’t do anything to deter him from his position.

“I have to admit, how you acted after the eight-year gap saddened me, made me doubt if the decision I and your grandfather had me was the correct one. When Feliciano had denied your proposal, it came to the point that I was happy, for a moment wondering if he could escape something from the strains of royal life. Yet it was at a harsh risk, one that I blamed myself for putting him in. I was constantly wondering what had happened to your friendship, wondering how something that had been so strong could be so easily dismantled. I now see that it was done out of that very love that truly had never left. Sure, if you would have spoken, we would have found another way and we could have dealt with the situation however possible. But like your grandfather, you like to keep your burdens to yourself, you don’t want to make anyone around you suffer, especially a lover.” Augusto stopped to take a deep breath, his voice becoming hoarse, giving himself the break to keep talking with strength. “Don’t do that,” he simply commanded, enough to break Ludwig from the stressed holding, as far as to shaken him to a slight slouched position. “This kingdom needs the Jack, the Queen and the King, together. If the Aces only wanted one, we wouldn’t have the other. Ludwig, you must learn that you can’t always act on yourself and that not everyone around you is a servant to only your laws. The queen and jack have just as much sovereignty as you, and like they will need you, you will need them.” He was harsh, but it surely pained him as he suddenly stopped with a cringe, Feliciano and Lovino both caressing his arms to try and bring him to a calm. Once he was well accommodated in the bed and that he could utter words again, he continued, this time more serene.

“You are lucky to have someone hardworking and dedicated like Kiku as your jack. And I might be biased because Feliciano is my grandson, but you are blessed to have him as your queen and perhaps even as your future husband. Do not take either for granted. Listen and give chances to their says even when you are against it, you never know if it might be the best for the kingdom.” His gaze now switched between them both, with a coming message surely for both their ears. “Work in union, in peace, but when the moment to fight comes, then be brave and strong. Look after one another, care, explore, learn and be passionate together.” Augusto had to stop and laugh at the blush both grew. “Lastly, believe in your love, it is powerful enough to bring a great amount of prosperity to our kingdom, perhaps even defeat Khaos.” It was a long shot and they all rolled their eyes.

“This is not the stories you used to tell us, nonno,” Feliciano had to admit.

“Oh it is, it is.” He raised Feliciano’s hand to kiss dearly.

Augusto reached his other hand for Ludwig to take, a show of emotion Ludwig hadn't been expecting, but it didn't mean he had denied it. No, he accepted that hold as tight as Augusto wanted to keep it, reminiscent of old days and keeping a silent conversation of things to come.

"You both will be excellent. As I said long ago, a King and Queen to remember. It won't happen on its own, so please, always give and fight for this kingdom. Do everything you can to keep it as alive as I left it."

The usual weights of this duty that brought usual dread to the two future rulers, but in the old man's words, with such belief, they believed it real, like a task that finally could seem manageable.

"Promise me…" Augusto weakened, showing clear his true pain, but he had to continue to speak, especially this. "Promise me you'll be there for one another, always, no matter the difficulties or even the disasters. Please, take good care of each other." He looked so scared, his voice worsening its hoarse, slumping more into the bed, to lay instead of sit. The grasp of their hands was the only thing that remained as strong, like a hold to a dangerous hanging.

"Without a doubt," Ludwig assured, now using both his hands to cover Augusto's in his accepting warmth.

"And with all our hearts we will fulfill. You don't have to worry at all, nonno," Feliciano joined in that acceptance to his request. To prove it more, Feliciano raised his hand, laying a kiss before he placed it to his forehead as a passing of strength and commitment.

In it they remained for a while, but Augusto still had other dear ones. He turned to his daughter now, who even with her shields and enforcements, couldn't hold the watering in her eyes.

"My girl, my sweet beautiful girl." He extended her hands towards her and like she was a little girl all over again. She dropped to it completely, taking a spot in his bed and embracing him well, head cuddling into his neck. Augusto showed his acceptance by placing a hand to caress at her back, bringing her forward to him.

It was all a true heaven of love.

"I think I taught you more than anyone. You're stronger than what meets the eyes and I'm sure you'll face everything with a good old Valenti punch. That will save everything."

She giggled into his neck, a laughter that spread well through her body, Augusto feeling her joy all throughout.

"Protect this family as you have done. After my departure, you are the new matriarch, all will fall in your belongings and you are to decide how it should spread to others."

No one disagreed, and she nodded, not capable of another word.

“Antonio!” He called next, said person standing immediately and heading forward as soldier-like as Ludwig. “Calm down boy, I long ago stopped being your boss, you are as part of this family as your coming baby and that means you get your own speech from me,” he smiled, just enough for Antonio to ease. “Protect my Lovi when he can’t, especially my great-grandson. Assure me both their safety and that you will continue to give them the love I saw you grant faithfully.”

“There was never a doubt,” Antonio assured.

Augusti smiled proudly before turning his attention to that last person left in the room. Vincenzo didn’t have to be told, he knew to stand and come close as the rest.

“Oh, Vincenzo…I stand by my first threats.” He could still look so intimidating.

“I expected that.”

“Good, even from the heavens you’re at risk of castration, so continue with the promises you gave me when you first asked Renata for courtship.”

“Till death and beyond, sir.” He even bowed.

“I do admit that you have been an excellent husband and father all this time. Renata chose a good man,” he smiled and even Vicenzo shared in a hold of those old hands.

“Now…I want to be done with all this sadness, let’s speak on other matters. Let’s eat and drink-”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Feliciano worried.

“I’m dying, who cares?”

And drinks and plates did they have, laughing and going on with stories as if tomorrow was never to come, as if time was not ticking away. When the night came, Augusto's state had deteriorated enough to the point that he went back to his constant coughing, the strains, and finding his movements harder and harder. He wanted no medicines, spells, or potions, saying he wanted to take his death in all its form and like a soldier facing his most dangerous battle. It still hurt the rest to watch. No caress or word was enough this time and it only haunted as the hours extended.

They had decided on taking their rest in the very room, across chairs, couches, some like Ludwig and Feliciano resting on a blanket on the floor. Both the royals were cuddled well, only in the late hours did Feliciano stir, with a sudden hunger that needed to be tamed. He scanned the room for anything, spotting the tray of cheeses the servants had brought for them after dinner. They weren’t as fresh as he would like, but it would make do. He stood gently and made his way to the small table in easy steps, around his brother, over his mother and trying not to push the tray too far to land on his father’s head.

“Feliciano…” Feliciano didn’t recognize the dim voice at first, scared until he noticed his grandfather awake.

“Oh, nonno, I was just getting some cheese,” he raised the piece to prove.

He said something, a mumble, lost to the air.

“What?”

“…come here,” Augusto forced more, and Feliciano obeyed, sitting by the bed as he had done earlier.

“What can I do for you?”

Augusto denied, instead forcing one arm to move. It was trembling, patting across his own chest, looking. “There’s something…I have to give you…and tell you…” even his voice gave the same shake.

“Nonno, I can get it for you,” Feliciano reached, not standing his grandfather’s suffering.

“No, I have to, this family…this family has been waiting for centuries…I have to be the one to give it to you. I was waiting for us to be alone.”

Finally, he found it, something he had wrapped around his neck, hidden well for none to have noticed before. He raised it all completely, until Feliciano could see the item hanging in the bottom. It was a key, a splendorous red key, rusted slightly with age, but still an amazing artistry that had Feliciano awing.

“This…this has been passed down through the family for generations. Augusta started it herself, it was one of the few things we knew about her.” He stopped for a moment, his breath shaking, every word a continuing stab. “We were told…to pass and…give it to the next person who is chosen queen in our family.” He desperately shoved it to Feliciano’s hold, who grasped it with a slight tremor.

He wasn’t really given any other choice.

“This key opens a room in the Berlin castle. There’s something in it…for you. I-It’s been protected and locked for centuries waiting for your coming. When you arrive…tell Gilbert-”

“Gilbert?” How would he know about that?

“He knows where the room is, he should take you to it. The item inside… use it well…” He relaxed for once, sinking into his pillow.

“But, but…but…what-what…what’s inside it?”

“You’ll find out. Best to keep you surprised,” he managed a smile.

Feliciano mentally groaned, but accepted the key, with it in his hands, taking the time to analyze all its intricate and beautiful details. “I think I’ll get mad if it’s another humongous history changing secret.”

Augusto laughed…and coughed harshly. “No, it’ll be fine, it’s just something that will help you.”

Feliciano confided in that, smiling and wearing the very key as his grandfather, hidden well under his shirt, his promise cross still the most evident and ruler in his chest.

Feliciano sighed, “I really hope so.”

“Are you worried about the war?”

“How can I not?”

“You’ll do fine,” he shrugged it off.

Feliciano giggled, “you make it sound so easy. I wish it could be that way.”

And Augusto didn’t have a response this time. He remained oddly silent, focusing on the comfort surrounding him and of those last breaths. Feliciano just sat and stared, wondering what he could do, if he should just stand and head to sleep or go on talking about something else…even if it would hurt Augusto to continue speaking.

“Lay down with me,” he suddenly commanded in another faint whisper.

Even if unexpected, Feliciano could not possibly deny that. Like it was custom, he found himself a small little space to lay beside him, cuddling into his chest, an arm wrapped around him, Augusto holding him as tightly as he could manage.

For the longest moment they remained awake, wide eyed, staring at nothing but the ceiling or the flickering of the candles that still survived.

“My sun, my moon, my land, my love…” Augusto suddenly began to sing, weak, each tune broken and falling, not reaching the brightness it could be in another time.

Feliciano didn’t mind it, he faithfully listened as it was yet another masterpiece, being respectful to remain silent and only listen.

“…the sky has all fallen…”

Feliciano, in his approaching tiredness, didn’t really paid mind to the new words, but let them pass as if they had always been there.

“The kingdom weeps their king’s farewell…”

The rest were too mumbled, too silent, sleep taking a stronger hold with each flickering candle.

“…so the heavens will bless in your rest our perfect peace…”

Was the last Feliciano heard in the night…and the last words he heard his grandfather omit. By the next morning, he awoke to his cold figure with no breaths or beat.

The family's king was gone.

Augustus had wanted the typical funeral of the province, and those of the White Kingdom, along with other servants of the household, did well to obey his wishes. His body wore his most pristine soldier uniform. Red, sashed, tassels and seals to shine, laid on a beautifully embroidered white linen, on a carriage bed, under and around him all kinds of red flowers along with golden ornaments of different symbols to represent aspects of his life. Already the family had decorated him excessively and there were still the ones the village had to offer. The carriage first awaited outside the Valenti villa, already a crowd gathered, mostly servants or people who had worked in their fields or from other villas in the area. Like the family, they were all dressed in their brightest red, in shinning jewels and long expensive fabrics. It was all the regality and grace of a ball, yet silent and solemn, no dancing, no laughter, barely even a murmur. Even when Ludwig and Feliciano had headed out with their own pristine clothing, the crowds remained as shut, attention either on the ground or on the procession to take place.

A path was already set in place, some markings of red ribbons to signify the route all were to follow. A priest had come from the near church, himself once a good friend of Augusto who would not deny his chance to bless his parting. He was the one to lead the ceremony, the one to guide his soul well to the promise of heaven in a series of steps that he would coordinate. He brought with him a book of old scripts, with all the chants, all the prayers that in his immediate arrival he began to read, only his voice the only uttering in the entire outer space.

He raised a knowing arm and symbol for the route to begin, seven servants in charge of pushing the carriage, while the rest followed behind, the crowd well behind the family. As it made its way past the fields, other villas or small homes, other groups joined in, first adding more to the red flowers, then a decided golden item before joining the rest in the back. The biggest commotion was when it passed by the village, the whole participating, not leaving a single house alive with the usual routine. Even the poorest whipped out the fanciest thing they had to join, with simple golden things but with red flowers to spare. At one point there were so many flowers and ornaments that it began to get difficult for the servants pushing the carriage, which settled in other four joining to keep with reaching the finality.

The last stop was the Artona hill, one of the tallest in the area, overlooking well to the village, smaller distant houses, the many fields of their fruits, of forest and routes to explores, the different villas and in the distance a small peek of the Valenti villa. It was ceremonially reserved for this ritual, proof in the flowers and gold that still lingered from past funerals.

All found their space around, only leaving the very summit for the carriage, the priest, and the family members. The priest was awaiting for all to assemble in silence, in the meantime raising a hand to get a taste of how the air was blowing, the family now holding to each other tight.

It was time.

The priest, confident in the words he now knew by heart, closed the book shut and began with his melodic chant. It was constant in funerals, a repeat that Feliciano thought no mind to

pay attention to in the past. But even in Latin, there were words that Feliciano just wouldn't miss.

"My sun, my moon, my land, my love…"

He found himself startled, like a loud bell was ringing right in his ear.

Pookie, who was sitting in his shoulder as dutifully, took flight then, nearing to the carriage, finding perch right in front of Augusto's head.

Wind began to rise around them, the flowers in the bottom giving a minimal swarm, something that most, perhaps not the children, paid no mind to, used to this show, but yet Feliciano could feel it all as if it was coursing across his veins.

"The sky has all fallen…"

The petals began to fly higher, all bringing with them a burning that began to scorch the carriage. Pookie leaned his head, the jewel in his head glowing, a magic passing over to the deceased body, just as the petals began to surround it, all watching as pieces began to be torn apart in gold and flowers.

"The kingdom weeps their king's farewell…But all will join in your last defend…"

As this cleaning fire took more and more of the body, Pookie flew back on Feliciano's shoulder, having fulfilled his own blessing on the parting soul. Feliciano really couldn't question it as he continued to be surged with power, so much that he was finding it hard to breathe. The beauty of the specks of gold and the petals flowing up into the air was enough of a distraction to keep eyes away from the arising queen, and so no one noticed the glow, especially the burning red in his irises.

"My king, we part in a tragedy unpromised…"

The rest of the song was nothing in his ears now, all he could feel was the drum of power. Trying to regain himself, he forced his gaze to the disappear of his grandfather's body, all of it now golds and petals scurrying high above in the air, surrounding well the hill and surely flowing out to further parts of the fields or whatever distance the air so decided to bring his beautiful remains. Seeing his grandfather's face disappear, the choking pain from his power, the very beauty of it all…reacted in a blow of tears.

He wept. Loud, agonizing, not an emotion left to hide and remain. The rest of the family, in this weakness, joined him, and the only one that could take a holding of Feliciano in his worst display of emotions, was his arising king. Ludwig held him tight, offering his own well-prepared suit as a tissue for the waterfall of tears, the shake and the continuing tremors of pain. No matter the strengthened shield Ludwig seemed, he still joined his arising queen with his own tears, falling upon his curls, wishing he could erase both their sorrows with the kisses he managed to lay on his head.

The show of red and gold continued around them, the chant long finished, but no one dared to move, no one dared to escape yet from the last lingering presence of Augusto Valenti. The

only relief was that his soul was free, in tune with the nature around them, a place in heaven and away from the restraints of a human body. Feliciano couldn't help but think that part of the pain surrounding him was his very presence so close. If only it could help to soothe, to sing as if he was still there.

It took several minutes for the petals and gold specks to disperse, only some small remains left in the hill and even on some on the people's hair and clothes. A small gold and red jeweled cross with his initials and symbol was placed alongside others as remembrance, a token to visit and pay homage to for whoever visited. Renata had created it herself, and she had stayed the longest before it, alone with a private conversation that she didn't wish to share with anyone.

She sighed, she only wished Augusto's cross could have been placed next to her mother's.

By now, the funeral had fallen as a little get together, for many to reunite and chat, or for each to give their heavy condolences to different members of the family. Some had brought coffee, tea and hot chocolate to share between all, others small pieces of bread or even cake. Feliciano couldn't find his usual big hunger, kindly denying every offer, preferring to just stay in Ludwig's hold as he slowly calmed down from his earlier outage.

"Are you sure you don't want anything, caro?" Renata came near, a cup of hot chocolate ready in her hand.

"Mamma, I'm fine, I'll have something when we get to the villa," he assured.

"Promise me that."

Feliciano nodded.

"I'll make sure he does," Ludwig added, which gave Renata more security.

"What the fuck is going on with you this time?" Lovino came near, well indulged in his own hot chocolate.

"I-It's nothing to worry about now, ma-maybe I just need some rest." Feliciano tried not to get his family worried too much.

"I think it's best we all start heading home now," Vincenzo suggested.

"The guest are beginning to leave," Zuma noticed.

"Great, to be honest, I'm tired of standing around this place. It only makes us feel more-" a sudden tremble, a cringe that grew and took control of Lovino. His mug dropped to the ground in pieces, the liquid wasted on the ground, a burning too intense going through his body to care about the loss of the drink.

"Lovi…Lovi, amor, wha-what's wrong?" Antonio came close to hold him. Lovino, ignorant that he was still in the public eye and trying to find some sort of relief through his husband,

kept a tight hold to him, too tight, gripping, Antonio was starting to feel pain.

“Lovino, Lovino,” Renata tried to call, but no word, instead a response in tears, in a shake and then a glow through the jewels and the marks in his body.

“Um…Um…something is going on.” Feliciano began to panic.

Those of the White Kingdom neared noticing the commotion. Kandake only took one simple glance of Lovino, Abasi a simple touch to the growing heat of his skin, and they instantly knew what was going on.

“The baby, it’s coming,” Kandake announced calmly.

“What?” Renata shocked, not believing that she hadn’t figured the obvious hints, taking instant holding to her son.

“No-now?” Lovino managed to utter through the heavy suffocation that began to take a hold of him.

“We just went through a funeral!” Antonio shouted.

“Like nature and your son will care about that,” Abasi commented.

“Enough! We should really get going! Lovino is going to get worst!” Kandake hurried them and they all acted. Despite it being sudden and not in an opportune moment, they still knew well what to do and made way to get their plans into motion.

In a goodbye to an old family member, they were now to welcome a new one.

Chapter 56

Chapter Notes

Hi, my name is Ashley and I like updating quickly on my fanfictions.

The servants that remained in the villa were expecting the melancholy return of their masters…not shouts, panic, rush and instant prepare to welcome a birthing process. Antonio and Lovino's room made do, where Lovino was set quickly to lay, clothes removed, Renata occasionally wiping some sweat and whispering whatever comfort she could. By command of Abasi, servants placed charm stones around the room for protection, to ensure health to both Lovino and the coming baby, as well as to somehow minimalize the pain and the strain the marks surely made. Lovino's shouts were constant over the array, Antonio's entire arm already a reddening, with cuts from his nail as Lovino hadn't dared let go of him…and the forming hadn't even started yet. Sadiq helped by bringing constant new towels, João kept making sure that the charms around the room were working at the right temperatures, Herakles was working with some of the white kingdom people to perfect medicines, Ludwig already prepared the blankets and clothes they would use for the baby, and Vincenzo, Renata and Feliciano stayed by Lovino's side. They gave him comforting words, held to him when Antonio was suffocating, gave him whatever potions, medicines and ease when certain areas became too bright and brought more pain.

At a sudden shiver going through his body, Antonio was well about to place a blanket over his naked figure. "Don't! He has to be completely free for this," Abasi scolded before any covering could take place.

Suddenly the frontal jewel in his forehead began to glow intensely, which in turn brought horrible head pain to Lovino, his grip on Vincenzo and Antonio worsening.

"Soon!" Renata knew, having to stop with the towel wiping for now to hold on to Lovino.

Kandake headed over to adjust the bed, putting it in an upright position that maintained Lovino somewhat sitting. "I need you to stay exactly like this, don't lay down or let yourself rest until it's over," Kandake commanded, making it clear as she stared right into those fretting hazel eyes.

"Sì…Sì!" He managed to answer through the force in his head.

"Caro, only put your arms forward, focus all your power on one point, this…will not be easy, but I need you stay focused on this point no matter what." Lovino could only nod to his mother, biting his lips, eyes watering, but shakily offering his arms as she told.

“Antonio, hold to any of the jewels, you’re the only one that can help him with the center focusing,” Feliciano told him, remembering this detail from a reading. Antonio nodded, placing one hand on a jewel on his shoulder, the other on one on his hip.

“When the lighting begins to burn all across your body, you will release all your energy from that point,” Kandake prepared.

“And keep your arms like that, the baby will most likely form there and that’s where you’ll hold him,” Renata made sure to advise as well, receiving another hurtful nod from Lovino.

They all watched how the lighting, like a filling, began to intensify from the jewel in his forehead, spreading down through all his marks until they reached his very feet. As they had said, it burned, fire stinging and only worsening his shouts and position.

“You have to stay seated, cariño. Just a bit more, just a bit more and we’ll get to see our baby,” Antonio smiled and even passed strength of his own magic through the jewels as told. It was just enough to keep him straightened, hands open, remaining to keep that focus.

“Now! Release! Release!” Kandake called once she noticed the specific brightening he took, and it was a great relief for Lovino to finally let out all that immense power. It still pained and cringed as that light began to take air, all meeting at one point as Lovino had made possible with his focusing. It rested in the very extend of Lovino’s arms, a ball of light increasing, burning in sparks of fire that exploded and extended with wind. Some in the room had to find cover to not be blasted or burned.

For a moment everything was blinded, the only sounds being Lovino’s ultimate breath of relief…and the slight cry of a baby. It didn’t last, all they heard then was comfort and breathing, no one daring to peek at what was going on until the light had died out enough for their hands or arms to be removed from their eyes.

As soon as the light had gone, as the power in the room dispersed, Lovino took an instant paternal holding to the person that formed, and all saw as the little figure rested well on the chest of its father. Already they wanted to shout and jump to the joy but held themselves to not ruin the peace this little baby boy had brought along with him. Lovino looked exhausted, drained out of everything, even color as the jewels and marks changed to a grey color, some already disappearing into dust and only leaving behind red blemishes and marks. Yet despite this, he wore a smile, a powerful one that made him shine above the disasters the birthing process had caused. Even in his worst, he could still caress his hands over the child’s small back, look to him with a deep fond, already whispers of deep love that none of them could hear. They were all hypnotized to stillness, staring at the scene with flourishes of feelings that had to be held down to leave the room in the wished silence.

From what they could see, the boy was in a healthy color, slightly bronzed like its parents, dark hair, no Valenti curls for now, no eye color to see in rest, but yet what a beauty, what a blessing and light that they awed with no smile to break. Antonio, who hadn’t stop staring at his two loves, was finally reaching a point that could not hold the tears any longer.

“I think it’s best we leave them for now,” Kandake suggested with a sweet smile, already pulling some of the servants and others to leave. The hardest to get to move were Vincenzo,

Renata and Feliciano, who even as they were pushed away, kept their eyes glued to the figures, their freeze and sights surely begging to stay and for more of a meet with their grandson and nephew.

“You’ll have your chance, but it’s more important to them than anyone.”

The household settled into normality, but word remained on the newborn, which granted them all an extra spark to the action of their jobs, even when they had to deal with things considering Augusto's passing, like organizing and storing things from his old room. A joyful atmosphere fell into the villa, seeming to light every corner in great shine, a smile even when the most tedious was done. Only some would return to the room to check health wise and clean up, while the masters in turn remained by the door the entire day, going as far as to have their food in the area. Like hawks they watched all who entered and left, wondering when it would finally be their turn, disappointment every time a nurse denied them.

“Don’t you think this it’s really cute?” Feliciano held out a robe for the baby, red with a beautiful symbol of a St. Mark in front. Pookie showed clear delight by rubbing himself already on it.

“It has gone through all four kingdoms and through all kinds of accidents. Feliciano kept it well in our bags,” Ludwig told.

“I wish I could give him more, but I lost many of those things through the trip,” he saddened, but at least he still had this.

“It’s beautiful anyways, besides, we already have more than enough here,” Renata assured.

“Trust me, more than enough,” Vincenzo rolled his eyes.

“As in, we have an entire room enough,” Renata had to admit to her excessiveness.

In the mist of their laughter, the door finally cracked open, Antonio with a perfect glow as he peaked to smile at them all. They instantly stood, crowding at the door for news.

“You can come in, but…try to keep your voices down, we want to keep the baby asleep for now.”

Understanding and obedient they kept even their steps slow and silent, approaching in that very easiness forward to the newly prepared bed. Lovino was now well covered in his sleeping robe, blanket over him, the baby dressed as well in his own white robe, comfortable and resting in the well hold of its father’s arms. Antonio returned to their side, taking seat right in the bed, Lovino leaving good enough space for him to take. They leaned together quite sweetly, and they haven’t gotten over just staring at their baby boy, relying on that silence, for a moment forgetting there were others in the room.

“Everything all right?” Renata neared, smiling proudly to Lovino, a hand caressing at his hair.

“After everything…yes, everything is definitely all right.” He raised the boy to embrace warmly, leaving a kiss on his little head before he looked up to his mother in the same prideful gleam. He offered then the child, Renata startled suddenly at such acceptance, but she took from it, holding the baby tightly to her chest in all the protections expected.

“Lovino, he’s absolutely wonderful,” she complimented, leaving her own kiss.

Vincenzo and Feliciano each took a shoulder to lay upon and watch the boy, awed at how much cuter it was up front like this. They had to contain themselves from begging for an instant hold as well. Ludwig settled with just staring from afar. Lovino might be relaxed right now, but he didn’t know how that could turn if he got closer to take the same interest as the rest of the family.

It seemed to have awaken as it started stretching and yawning, Lovino and Antonio perking, ready to take and comfort him for if he started crying. Luckily, he didn’t, he was at ease in the hands of his grandmother, settling more into this new loving warmth. They all had to hold themselves from shrilling.

“Have you finally decided on a name?” Feliciano asked as he neared a hand to caress at those small dark brown locks.

“Augustino,” Lovino declared loudly to the room.

All raised their heads in questioning and wonderment. Lovino slightly hated that he had to explain himself when it was so plainly obvious.

“Nonno had mentioned he liked it…I didn’t take him seriously though, thought he was joking even if sometimes I did find myself thinking about it…” he became silent suddenly, holding tightly to the covers under him, trying to keep a control to not let himself shed. “Antonio and I talked and after this…we…decided on it…on his honor, legacy, so we can remember and be reminded of him…as well as for our son to know and be proud of his namesake.” With a breath he looked up to the child, meeting the eyes of all with the same agreement.

This was the perfect name, already so fitting and belonging and no other could compare to the strength it already gave such a tiny being.

“It’s wonderful,” Renata could only say, rocking the baby.

“Augusto would have loved it,” Vincenzo added, Renata now giving him the chance to hold, all watchful if anything.

“If he was here, he wouldn’t have let him go,” Feliciano chuckled.

“Going all about that he is the most gorgeous in all four kingdoms,” Antonio brimmed.

“And he is!” Renata assured, mocking her father’s tone and even his rising hand gesture.

In between the laughter, the joy, the coos, and the attention solely on the baby, Feliciano felt a sudden shiver to add. It was like that very surge of power he had felt in Augusto’s funeral, only this time it was much less, a simple tickle that didn’t bother or distract. It was more like

an intuition, a reminder of someone…someone else in the room. He looked among the room, still the same people, the same items, the same charms of protection, all in its regular. He shrugged it off sensing that it wasn't dangerous, especially now being it his turn to hold the baby. He brought him forward, rocking and smiling down in welcome, unaware of the fond eyes that stared from the afterlife.

"Tino, Tino, Gustino, Augustino," João had annoyingly sang throughout the whole morning as he had the chance to spend some more time with his new nephew. Feliciano had found it adoring, smiling the entire time and even moving his head to the song. Lovino on the other hand, was close to throwing a near vase to make him stop.

"Please, stop torturing my son like this," Lovino groaned out.

"Torture? Nonsense! He loves it!" He cuddled their noses together with the same repeat of the song that brought the same actions of hands moving and curious bright green eyes gazing about. "See, see!"

"He's probably trying to find a way to slap you."

"He's only three days old! He doesn't know such malice!"

A sudden knock interrupted.

"Hey João, we really need your help with the packing," Sadiq requested, urgent and hoping for immediate parting.

"Fine." João rolled his eyes, giving Augustino for Feliciano to hold, hands well around his body, rocking him and already bringing new coos.

"Don't get too comfortable! I'll come back later," João warned before he settled off.

And so Feliciano made use of the time he had to only stare at his nephew, sing him sweet little Italian lullabies and bring him as close as he wanted to nuzzle and kiss.

"Augustino is going to be so haggled," Lovino already knew, slightly worried.

"You can't blame him, he's so adorable," Feliciano smiled, bringing his face close to his to rub slowly.

"Yeah… it will be kind of sad being the only kid."

"There's plenty of babies and children in the castle, Lovi, I'm sure Augustino will make a friend."

"I mean in the family. We need to balance it out. You start having kids!"

Feliciano almost choked on his own spit but didn't because of the dear hold he had in his arms. "That's too brash Lovi…"

“Don’t you love kids?”

“I do, but now is not the time for something like that. I mean, I have to be crowned, I just found out about Augusta and being an Ace, there’s the alignment and war-”

“Yeah, I get it, don’t depress the room.”

“I just need you to understand, I don’t think I can bring a child to a situation like that,”

“Yeah…I have to deal with that burden.”

“You’re not going to be Queen, Lovi.”

“Sorry, your majesty.”

“The burdens won’t be as strong. You’re safe to have a child and have a family, and I’m glad you brought Augustino, look at how sweet he is,” Feliciano exalted, placing a gentle kiss on his head.

“He is…” And Lovino smiled beautifully, glad to have him alight his life now in a new way.

No war, position, Khaos or even Pisa could take him away from the delight of his son.

He sighed, detesting how weak he was to still stand, to reach for his baby on his own and hold him by his command. “Can I?” He settled, extending his arms for a beg of him back.

“Of course,” Feliciano obeyed, standing and bringing him over, gently settling him in his brother’s arm and giving him the moment to watch and caress.

“Well, this is yet another reason to fight for our kingdoms,” Lovino smiled.

“Lovino, you don’t have to fight!” Feliciano still insisted.

“I will if it means more protection for him.” His hold on the baby became much tighter, being truer to his promise.

Any other fights were held by yet another knock at the door. This time it was Ludwig, a fretful expression on his face. “Feliciano, I just received the latest later from the castle. We’re very late and opa is insisting for us to arrive as soon as possible,” he informed, trying to say the words through surely the headache this information gave.

“We will be leaving in two days, there’s nothing to worry about,” he tried to relax.

“Opa wants us to leave immediately, as soon as the next morning. In fact, if we can do so tonight, even better,” he hurried.

“We can’t just leave, Augustino was just born and Lovino is still recovering. I don’t think they can manage a trip like that.”

“They could always leave in another trip,”

“Nonsense. Call Antonio, we’re leaving tomorrow morning.”

Feliciano startled to the point of loosening words of protest. “Lo-lo-lovino, this is five days of traveling. Are you sure you can manage with that as the baby?” He worried deeply.

“Just sit down in a moving carriage, how hard can that be?” He rolled his eyes at his brother worrying over such stupidity.

“After the experience of this journey, Lovino, a lot of things can go wrong!”

“And I’m sure you and King potato over here will protect us and get us back on track. Relax, you’re already in Hearts, the worst has surely happened. I doubt much could occur now.” He was confident, leaving in him joyful expectations and even immediate plans for their castle arrival.

Feliciano gazed over to Ludwig for his opinion, and the arising king only shrugged, not seeming to mind Lovino’s decision. “Fine…we’re leaving tomorrow morning.” Feliciano gave up.

Lovino smiled as if he won a victory, rocking Augustino as the baby gave a sudden mumble. It was the sight to get Ludwig staring, silence when the two brothers were expecting a worded response from him.

“Luddy?” Feliciano questioned.

Ludwig shook, “I-I’m sorry, I’ll let everyone know instant-”

“Do you want to hold the baby?” Lovino suddenly asked.

Ludwig startled, blushing, stuttering, looking away as if to hide it all. Both brothers couldn’t hold the chuckle. “Come on, I know you want to, no one can resist him,” Lovino tempted, offering the boy in all the cuteness galore.

Ludwig came close, albeit shakily, truly debating if he should do this.

“I won’t mind, doofus, but the moment you drop him, I don’t care if our kingdom is left without a new king, I will throw you out the window,” Lovino still threatened.

“I won’t let anything happen to him,” Ludwig promised sincerely, just as he came to contact with the figure, and as promising and loving as the rest had been, he held and rocked him to his chest, protective and not a chance to hold down the very sweet smile he showed. Even Lovino had to admit that it was quite adoring, and as he looked over to Feliciano, who had this dreamy and blushing expression on his face, there was no doubt that it was surely one of the most beautiful scenes he had seen in his life.

Four carriages were prepared for the large group that was departing to Berlin. One was for those of the White Kingdom, another for João, Herakles and Sadiq, one for Antonio, Lovino and Augustino, and finally the royal one for Ludwig and Feliciano. By the early morning,

they were all prepared outside, their baggage packed well the night before so they could head off instantly. They were making sure that Augustino was safe and comfortable, that Lovino wasn't straining and that they had all they needed for them.

"Is it really okay?" Feliciano had asked for surely the hundredth time.

"We're completely fine, don't worry about it," Lovino assured, glowing well without an issue or presence of having given birth. Antonio held the little infant well on his chest, covered in extra safe blankets.

"If anything happens, don't hesitate to call and we'll stop the caravan," Ludwig added.

"We'll make sure," Antonio said and yet Feliciano continued with hesitation. Pookie, who sensed this, flew inside the carriage, making himself comfortable in Antonio's arms alongside Augustino, already watching over him with heavenly protection.

"I'll leave you guys with Pookie." No one seemed to mind, and finally Ludwig could close the carriage door and they could head over to their own. Renata and Vincenzo were there waiting. and Feliciano ran off to take part in a strong parting embrace.

"Don't stop writing letters," Vincenzo reminded.

"I'll let you know of absolutely everything," Feliciano made sure.

"We'll head over ourselves soon enough," Renata reminded.

"And no matter when you decide, we'll be there to welcome you," Ludwig said in earnest.

"We'll be looking forward."

"Now, go! Go! Go! Go! The capital has been waiting! Much must be done! The kingdoms must know!" Renata ushered and pushed them to their carriage, closing the door shut, patting it harshly in finality and loud assuredness for all the other carriages to know.

With Ludwig and Feliciano's leading, the horses began their thread and movement forward, around and out the gates with destination to Berlin. Vincenzo and Renata remained waving in farewell until all four carriages were well out of vision.

Chapter 57

Chapter Notes

> Updating this one took longer than I wanted. But things continue to be rather hectic for me. Never the less, I keep on. I hope you enjoy!

Those next five days of traveling went well with no kind of complication. They would only stop three times a day for food and continued swiftly knowing of the running time. Augustino was a little angel, well behaved, all a chance to hold and love, giving Lovino a well appreciated break after having to deal with his outbursts in the carriage only for him and Antonio. It was a small space and it only seemed to intensify his cries.

To Feliciano, it was reminiscent of his first ever trip to Berlin, passing many familiar landmarks and even stops that excited him as if it was the first time. He didn't think he would get on this road again with such experiences, along with his brother, nephew and few of a surviving group from the White Kingdom. His very last sketch on his sketchbook for the trip was one of Augustino and Pookie resting together in one of their stops, a beauty of a completion that made him shut it and tie it for saving, only to see when wanting to regain memories, show others and relive inspirations.

Word of their trip was well talked about in the city, so it was no surprise that their return would be welcomed with large crowds, in celebratory shouts that there was no possible way to just ignore as they rode once again through those large streets that Ludwig and Feliciano had missed dearly. Feliciano waved in greetings to all, Ludwig falling to the same after some convincing from his arising queen. It had been a surprise to many who knew of the prince's usual cold demeanor, but they waved back just as eagerly.

"Ah, finally, we're home," Ludwig sighed, resting from his greetings into his sitting. Feliciano joined him in it, laying his head upon his chest, arms well wrapped around his arm, Ludwig an arm over his body, smiling at the beautiful normality that began to take place with their carriage rides now.

"Yes, we are, I'm so happy."

"There's still a lot with have to deal with though."

"Shh, let's just focus on getting back," Feliciano wanted to distract from the sorrow for now.

In the mere minutes left of their ride, they settled in a peaceful rest, relishing on however long this silence could last.

Because of the magnitude of people awaiting by the castle gates, the carriages were instead taken on another route that would bring them to another more hidden entrance of the castle. It was usually the ones the servants used to pick up produces brought. Not the shiniest or the most lavish part in the castle, not even dignified enough to welcome two important royals, citizens of the past White Kingdom and a newborn, but it still oozed home and welcome.

Already by the front of the staircase, Kiku waited in the shiniest they had seen him, waving as lively as a child. King Aldrich, Queen Louis, along with Reinhardt, Monika and Gilbert were well behind him, jumping and celebrating as the rest of the city was doing. The very first to get down were the arising royals, Feliciano rushing off to embrace Kiku in a missed embrace. This time, Kiku didn't deny it, his own arms wrapped well around Feliciano, both sharing the same big smiles.

"Ah gods, I missed you so much, Kiku," Feliciano admitted.

Ludwig was well taken by his family, hurdled in a caging embrace, all going on with coos as if he was a baby again. It was all so annoying…but endearing at the same time.

"Hey, Feliciano! Get in here!" Gilbert shouted.

And while Kiku headed off to greet Herakles in their usual loving gazes and kisses, Feliciano jumped into the group and was taken in just the same love. It was the moment that Antonio and Lovino decided to get down from their own carriage, Augustino kept well in Lovino's grip.

"Is that…?" Monika was the first to peek out, of course with interest to the newborn Feliciano had spoken about in his letters.

"Augustino," Feliciano introduced.

As expected, they headed toward the couple, eager to meet the young one. Lovino showed him forward and the new shrills and coos started.

"Ah, he's beautiful," Queen Louis commented, already a blessing spell in her hand as she let it caress through his hair.

Then, to the surprise of the royals, a weird array of dark people in fabrics of pristine white took their descend and to the questioning eyes of all.

"It is an honor to be in your presence, your majesties," Abasi announced for all, while the King and Queen stood perplexed and dumfounded. Out of respect they bowed as well to them but gazed over to Ludwig and Feliciano expecting answers.

"They are from the White Kingdom," Ludwig told, earning shock and question from all.

"But…weren't they all dead," Gilbert said.

"Some managed to survive and keep their customs in a hidden region in the Club Kingdom. They came with us to help prepare."

“Prepare? Prepare for what?” King Aldrich seemed almost insulted that he didn’t know of such thing that involved help from a group like this.

“Something you’ll need all the help you can get for,” Sadiq commented as he already began with taking much of the luggage up the stairs and inside, where servants were already there prepared to take them.

The next questions were the adding of such figures like João, Herakles and Sadiq. It was all too much to answer at once.

“We have to unpack for now,” Ludwig only settled with answering, all taking part in taking down something from the four carriages. “First of all, Augusto…”

“Ah yes, how is his condition going?”

“He’s dead,” Ludwig announced as they headed up this chosen entrance to the more familiar halls of wealth.

King Aldrich stopped in his tracks, all moving around him with the weight of the bags.

“Was a proper funeral made?” Queen Louis asked.

“Yes, he was flown in the hill of Artona.”

“Then his spirit is well freed and in peace. Bless it. Feliciano and Lovino, all my condolences,” she wished, and both the brothers nodded in acceptance to her kind words.

“We shall make something to commemorate him,” Aldrich could say between the sure pain of losing a dear friend.

“But…what happened that caused him to die?” Monika asked.

“We’ll explain later. Opa, I want you to organize an immediate meeting for tomorrow morning. Everyone of leading importance in our kingdom must be there. Feliciano and I will tell our experiences of our trip, what we found out and about the coming war.”

“War?” They all startled, even servants dropped some of the items.

“That’s impossible! There’s no such threats by any kingdom,” Aldrich defended.

“This threat is different and much worse than you think. Like I’ve said, we’ll explain everything in the meeting.” Ludwig then dropped some bags on the floor, leaving the servants to deal with them as he focused on another cargo of importance. “We got this from a library in Khaos’s castle,” Ludwig informed as he showed his bag full of books. Feliciano showed his own, Pookie releasing in it the ones he took himself.

“Khaos’s castle!” Aldrich panicked.

Ludwig had to hide a groan. "Right now, we just need a place to store them where they will be the safest possible. You have no idea how important these are, and they might even help us

in the coming war."

Aldrich none the less acted, handing the bag of books to Feliciano and an offering maid. "Feliciano, there's a safe in the Queen's study in your area of work where you can store them. It will only open to the touch of a Queen, arising or not."

"Will do."

"Right. Then in the meantime, Opa, I will help you to announce the meeting and make sure that everyone will be present," Ludwig was ready to fulfill that instant.

"Of course, let's head-" Ludwig suddenly turned to Feliciano instead, just as he was heading up a staircase to bring the books where he was told. Ludwig stopped him by taking a dear hold of his hand. "Let's have dinner by ourselves tonight, there's something I want to talk to you about." Everyone stared on as Feliciano turned to Ludwig, sharing that loving hold and gaze.

"That be wonderful, but…is it something I should worry about?"

"No, definitely not, I just…want to do something special for you…" Ludwig blushed-he blushed!-, shied, and Feliciano smiled back with a stricken grin.

"By the balcony of our room?"

"Yes, definitely."

"I'll be looking forward," Feliciano gave a little jump of joy, so cute that Ludwig couldn't help the lean and Feliciano oh so wanted that glorious kiss upon his lips.

Feliciano parted up the stairs with a bounce, and Ludwig remained struck, enamored to even those steps. He turned back to the rest to see them startled, shocked, eyes and mouths wide opened to what they just saw.

The prince and the arising queen…just kissed… they planned a dinner date, with all the excitement of love, true and honest. Kiku asked Herakles to pinch him to make sure he wasn't dreaming, Gilbert wondered if he had finally gone crazy and King Aldrich and Queen Louis wondered if some sort of imagery trick spell was placed on them.

"What?" Ludwig wondered to their expressions, unaware of what he just did in front of them.

"Nothing…nothing," King Aldrich began to smirk as the rest, all exchanging teasing smiles.

"Let's just…get to work," Queen Louis suggested for now.

And they all settled off to their duties… already with rumors and ideas.

It was expected that the day was filled with all kinds of jobs, adjustments, reminders and fillings. They had returned that morning and already they were to turn back to their royal

duties as if they had never left. Feliciano paced the halls back to his room exhausted, wishing no more than to fall head first to his bed and forget everything for the night. That was until he met that candle light, that delightful breeze, a beautiful starry sky, stars continuing even on the ground with a spectacular view of the splendorous city. A very delightful scent reached him, adding yet another touch to the calling to come forward to the table presented at the balcony. He had been there only a few times, mostly because Ludwig had been annoyed with it before, but now he actually sat at that very table, back to him, gaze lost in the view as he was…as well as murmuring under his breath.

"-you can do this, you can do this, you can do this."

"Luddy?" Ludwig startled, giving a bounce that gave a slight shake to the table. Still the blond managed to turn, trying to hide his nervousness in a crocked smile. "Feliciano, yes, please, um…sit down." He even pulled out his chair and almost tripped as he went back to his own.

"You've lately gotten so nervous with me," Feliciano chuckled.

"I-I I know, just…lots of things, being more aware of my…emotions, and I want to show them right and make sure that I'm treating you well after everything. You didn't deserve any of that and-"

"Ludwig! Breathe!" He took a deep one and let it calm him down. "It's all right…I think you're being very cute," he admitted with that sweet smile that gave more relaxation to Ludwig, even giving a sigh of relief.

The food was still warm between them and for a rare moment Feliciano ignored it in favor of just admiring his lover, ready for what he wanted to speak. Ludwig decided to just push himself, take the dive without any more restraints. He took Feliciano's hand and said, "I made you so many promises, gave you so much hope and anticipation, all to welcome you like I did. It was a horrible year for both of us and I believe I should do something to make up for it."

"How so?" Feliciano was truly curious, easing closer.

"By fulfilling those promises, being a gentleman, finding whatever time to give you, help with any of your questions and really be there like I wasn't. It's finally time I treated you like a queen…or ace like we recently found out."

Feliciano gave a short chuckle, the word not so aggravating like it usually was. "You don't have to do anything fancy, Luddy, just what you know will make us both happy." The hold of their hands became tighter, in it that fulfill and that new promise.

"I will be sure!"

"And I will accept everything and give you all I can myself." He stood and leaned to place a dear kiss on his forehead, before settling back and getting his cutlery ready. "And what will make me happy right now is having this chicken! I missed the castle food!" And Feliciano

began feasting, ready and sure to take a bite and finish everything. Ludwig laughed and joined him.

Later, after the food and table were picked by the servants, they prepared their sleep, the first time in their own room after the trip. There was a semblance of hesitation as they dressed, backs to their beds, with wondering and questions of whether to voice them.

Ludwig and Feliciano settled with their underpants, under their own covers, gazes to each other, facing one another in comfort…yet empty, cold, lonely.

They were too far.

In an instant, both stood, in silence agreeing with removing the bedside table in between to the bottom, then each pushing their bed until no such space was left between them. They took a single blanket that they both got draped under, arms well wrapped around each other, bodies beginning a syncing of breaths to match, cradled, an occasional hand playing and traversing soft or hard skin.

This would be their nights from now on and they smiled at this beautiful start.

The halls to the meeting room were a mess of people, much like the one they had before the arising royals departed on the journey. Feliciano was finding it hard to move between the crowds, even with guards making way for him.

People were terrified, for rumor of war had spread easily and caused quite a panic and worry over what the arising rulers would say concerning their very hectic trip that made news across all four kingdoms. The anxiousness was stronger once Feliciano could enter the room, the chatter loud, hard for him to even call out to Kiku, who was sitting at a chair across from him at the table. There was confinement even as he tried to reach his chair, one Ludwig shared in as he had to find entrance through another part of the room. When they met, they held to their hands for leverage, of course nervous over what they were to tell soon.

“Are you ready?” Ludwig asked him, bringing his hand up to his lips to kiss, an action that brought a small silence, many surely surprised at this sudden loving interaction between them.

Feliciano took deep breaths, nodding but still a slight tremble in that hold. “Somebody has to announce this.”

“We are here if you need us,” Abasi said as he reached their side along with the others, as immaculate as ever in their white robes. It was another sight to catch many eyes.

Deeming themselves ready to begin at the King’s announcement, Ludwig and Feliciano each took their seat beside each other, surrounded well by those of the white kingdom, showing well the aid. Once Aldrich saw them well prepared, he raised one hand, the other using a cup to tap loudly at the table, the ringing enough to catch everyone’s attention and fall silent.

“Thank you all for your presence and dispositions,” he started. “We are here as a welcome to our arising rulers, who had returned after months of traveling an arduous track, with much more complications, dangers and news than we expected. I’m sure you’re all as curious to hear their telling…as well as these allegations of a coming war.” When Aldrich turned to meet eyes with his grandson and his arising queen, all followed, the heaviness more intense now, their news more fire to their paper, hesitation clear, the continuing staring, eyes haunting. “You may begin.” And with that he gave them the center, yet both were frozen as they thought on how exactly they should start. They gazed to one another, trying to omit what could be that point, until Feliciano decided on one. It came simple when he noticed Pookie’s arrival with a nuzzle against his neck as per usual.

“We’ll begin from the very beginning, our departure…when the Aces decided to send us a St. Mark for our journey…”

And so they told, with help of the White Kingdom, similarly to how they did that crew on the trip from Clubs to Hearts. This time, their audience here were elite men and women who controlled different aspects of their kingdom. It was all the heads of control and the people that will help them organize every point of this surely coming war. This was the first step to the yearlong preparations that will determine the future of the four kingdoms.

“In here,” Ludwig raised two bags, “are the books that we took from Khaos’s private library. Its information given by the universe itself about all aspects of our lives. There are new spells, power, incantations and strategies to use. We recommend that you all take your most needed readings. The ones concerning Ace and generational power, you will study and practice with either me or Feliciano. If we can start as soon as tomorrow, the better.”

Some grew nervous. Tough looking and intimidating generals, guards and soldiers, fretting, looking away, fearful of such power. To Feliciano, it was like the adorations of gods, impressed and loving, but also begging for a mercy of some sort of dark secret kept to themselves. He didn’t understand it. He wasn’t going on a reckoning, he wasn’t punishing anybody or even showing that power. He sat as he always did, smiling and with an impressive calm despite what they just told.

He later had to let them know that they had nothing to fear and that he hoped they could work together well so he could practice and use well his ace power.

“Will we contact the other kings and queens?” One wondered.

“The Clubian royals are already aware and are in the process of their own preparations. We must now contact Diamonds and Spades and let them know immediately.”

“We will organize a meeting with all the royals two months from now to better compromise and make decisions."

“What about the people?” Another said.

“Should we let them know about this…about Augusta?” It was a big question that earned another heavy silence and expectant stares to the arising royals.

With all this dependence, all this decisions in their hands, it already felt like they had been crowned.

“I want a big announcement to be made concerning her,” Feliciano spoke up. He was her vessel and her heir, it was only fair that it fell on his command. “I want messengers to announce in every corner possible, I want books and pamphlets to be spread all across the kingdom, let teachers tell their students, parents their children, make boards, make walls, let me feel the surprise all around. All should know the real history of our world and the real hero of the War of the Darkened Decades.” There was such bravery and strength in Feliciano’s tone that many admired and adhered, already writing what they were soon to release. “Let them also know about the war.” There was uncertainty, all scribbling halted.

“Will that be safe?”

“We cannot lie to our people and hold this information!” Feliciano seemed insulted that it was the path they already wanted to take as they heard the news. “I rather they are prepared then be surprised with an attack. If we tell them, were an at advantage of seeing them rise and join us. We need all to fight. We can’t keep this hidden from them.” Louis and Ludwig smiled at Feliciano’s queenly ordering. More than ever he shone ready and strong for the position that hopefully will come soon.

“When should we let them know?”

“From this moment. As soon as the writings are done, I went them all released.”

“What about the other kingdoms?”

“Each king, queen and jack will determine how it should be told in their own. But we must let them know of the news first.”

Other commands and chatter continued, Feliciano well distracted and fulfilling in his own duties to notice as Ludwig stood, making way between all who flew parchments, pens, corrections, even messengers going about and leaving the room. He continued until he reached his grandfather, already signing off declarations that continued out to be fulfilled.

“I’m sorry,” Ludwig uttered, head laid low as if he committed a large offense.

Aldrich didn’t understand it. “For what?” He had to question.

“For…how I acted, what I did, I really…should have gone to either you or Oma. Now you’re stuck with doing all of this for us past what was supposed to be your retiring years.” He was once again embarrassed for not being crowned yet, the lateness taunting.

“Ludwig, we do not mind doing what we can for our kingdom. We were chosen after all and it is in our duty no matter how extended it reaches. Any other and they would have forced you into a marriage and a coronation you weren’t ready for simply for their own comfort,” he understood, his smile genuine as papers kept coming into his hands to check.

“You…kind of did."

“Did I really? I just arranged your engagement. I didn’t expect Feliciano to deny your proposal, but by his wishes, we decided to withhold until an agreement was reached. I have to admit, I’m glad you have improved your relationship with him.” He finally had the time to mention, smiling proudly.

“Just…” he blushed, just like his once childish self, “don’t expect anything quick by it. I’m not sure if he still wants to continue with the marriage despite.”

“Do not worry, we will be patient. And concerning what you did in the field, do not worry either. It was a show of sacrifice to admire. Not how I would have wanted you to solve the matter…but at least it earned us those books and insight on Khaos and his men. I’m confident in what we can achieve with it for what’s to come.” He placed a comforting hand on his shoulder, showing clear in his eyes that he had no doubt and only belief for his grandson. “You’re proving yourself more each and everyday of your worth to take the throne.” It was one of the biggest compliments he could receive. Unexpected, but he accepted it with a deep grin.

More than ever Ludwig felt strongly like a king.

Chapter 58

A very busy week passed after Ludwig and Feliciano's arrival, in it, the news being brought to the public, reaching all its furthest as Feliciano had wished.

As expected, the reactions were large, a variety that none of the royals could point as one emotion. But it was giant, everyone could feel a change, everyone was awakening and realizing, a rumble that continued well as new people kept on learning. Feliciano had seen proclamations large enough to cover the entire castle gate, pamphlets and books that were heavy in his hand, and letters received by teachers on questions and suggestions on how to approach their students about it. Of course, there were those who were skeptical and needed further explanation to whatever doubt they had. As part of this campaign, the small White Kingdom group decided to offer themselves as messengers and further conveyers of the news. Just the night before, Ludwig and Feliciano had wished them luck as they departed across other villages and cities in the kingdom to answer to those letters of denial and skepticism. On whatever other time they had, they dedicated to reading Khaos's books, intrigues and ideas growing that made it difficult to rest as their minds continued to explore and know before they could try. More and more they were tempted for their training to start and really try. But this night, they settled well on just laying on their bed, staring at the ceiling, Ludwig laying well on his back, Feliciano on his sides, not minding having his stare lay on the structure of his arising king's body.

How blessed he now felt to actually be able to lay his palm upon his toned chest and stomach, their hands sharing a comfortable hold to join along with the relaxation of this silence. They kept that moment to their thoughts, each other's presence as a leverage of hope for when their minds went too dark on expectations of the future. It was a moment to think like this that Feliciano was reminded of an immediate item of importance. He opened the first drawer of his bedside table and pulled out the red key his grandfather had given him as his last parting gift. He brought it to hang between the both, the first time Ludwig spotted it, sitting up to stare as transfixed as Feliciano had done when he was first given it. It shone with a promise that Feliciano now wanted to find, now with a chance and time that was taken with the spread of the news.

"What is that?" Ludwig asked, hypnotized by its design and the sideways motion it hanged in.

"Nonno gave it to me before he died. He told me it was passed down the family by Augusta." Feliciano uttered in a saddened tone, the very weakness of those moments of loss. "He told me that it opens a room here."

"What room here? There's hundreds."

"He told me Gilbert would know."

Silence as Ludwig stared with confusion, trying to piece how that could work.

“Gilbert…Gilbert? What would he know about that room?” Ludwig couldn’t connect it at all to his older brother.

“I don’t know,” Feliciano leaned down closer to Ludwig. “We just have to ask. He might surprise us.”

Ludwig rolled his eyes not wanting to believe that. “I hope it’s not another letter from some distant ancestor.” He was already getting annoyed.

Feliciano chuckled, “Nonno already told me it wasn’t. He said…it will help us in the war.”

To Ludwig it was worrisome and suspicious. “Can I go with you?”

“I was meaning to ask you that.” He placed the key around him like the necklace it was given, resting down beside Ludwig, arms wrapped around his arms, as close as they had been used to the last few nights.

“Definitely.” As Assurance Ludwig laid a kiss on his head, turning to wrap an arm around his waist, pulling him even closer to himself.

Gilbert was laughing about with one of the servants as he usually did for his breakfast, unaware of the stationary eyes the arising royals kept on him. They practically ignored the fruits, bread and yogurt they had been given, only taking small unfinished bites, even letting some pieces fall on their chosen clothes for the day, uncaring. When Gilbert stood, they did so as well, together keeping a pace where they could walk well behind him without being seen.

“When should we ask?” Feliciano whispered to Ludwig.

“I recommend we get somewhere private.”

“I think we’re good right now.”

“We’re in an open hall, a servant could catch us."

“It can’t be such a big deal as to do it so privately.”

“We still have to be careful."

“Guys…if you’re going to spy or anything, try to be less suspicious and obvious,” Gilbert turned to them, stopping all their tracks, leaving the others rather startled and embarrassed.

“What’s up?” He asked, arms crossed and ready for whatever their words would be.

Feliciano was nervous, rocking on his heel and trying to find the push that could get him to ask. Ludwig had to slightly push him forward to get him to stop, to spit it out so they could already have an answer to this new question.

“Gilbert…” Feliciano started, now rubbing his hands with the occasional small pinch to get him to utter.

This was Gilbert, Gilbert who was always so nice and playful with him. There was nothing to worry about or fear, but who knows how heavy this really was on the man.

“Nonno…gave me this key.” He moved the item from under his blouse, showing it frontal to Gilbert. There was quick impression in his eyes and even standing.

“He told me you know the room it opens.” Feliciano stared on expecting, but Gilbert remained silent, his expression unreadable.

“Can I?”

Feliciano let him hold it, the albino inspecting well its red, all its vine-like design and feeling well its form. He raised his head to the both of them, smiling then. “Finally, I was getting tired of keeping jokers in constant watch of that room.” He truly sounded relieved, just as Feliciano to know that he truly knew.

“Jokers?” Ludwig on the other hand paid well attention to his words.

“I trust my men and women with my life," he sounded proud.

“Y-yoou-you…yours!?”

Why was he just giving them more questions?

“Oh, just come on and follow me, I’ll take you to the room,” he hurried, already ushering them to follow him down the hall to that certain direction. Feliciano excitedly followed, practically skipping, while Ludwig kept on stuttering behind.

“Ri-right…right now?” Ludwig thought it too sudden.

“Yeah, right now. You guys want to find out, don’t you?” Gilbert and Feliciano didn’t seem to mind at all.

“Okay then…how do you know about this room?” Ludwig thought that they should use the walk to learn.

“All joker leaders know about it.”

“What?!” Ludwig shouted, a strong echo that vibrated and could have alerted the whole castle.

“Luddy, bro, please, not so loud. That’s not something that I would be excited to talk about with Opa," he continued on as strongly and determined as ever.

“The joker leader…the joker leader…you’re the joker leader!” Feliciano was impressed, as well as full of admiration.

“Yeah…kind of wanted to go my whole life without letting any of you know, but well…you two will be a special sort of king and queen with a…second darkened war over your heads, so you both need to know as much as possible.” He began to lead them to an elder part of the castle, uninhabited and with no use for their contemporary, but all had recognized this area because of occasional passings. For the arising royals, it was the first time they were heading into their depths, into more cracked and faded areas that they didn’t think their castle could hold.

“Ho-how? Why?” Ludwig was still in deep shock, not understanding how Gilbert could tell them this with calm and Feliciano could just follow him this accepting.

“Hmm…to be honest, I was always interested in joker tales. Don’t you remember?” Of course, whatever they knew about Jokers they learned because Gilbert would mention a thing or two. “I kept learning more and I came to the decision that I agreed with a lot of their teachings.”

“You do know that a joker renounces their kingdom,” Ludwig wanted to remind.

“Exactly…and so I did!” He gave quite an excited jump as they turned to another hall, one that turned into downward stairs.

“You renounced the Hearts Kingdom! You’re a Hearts prince! You have lineage to one of our most celebrated Jacks! And you live in the castle!” Ludwig felt somewhat betrayed, even insulted that his brother could answer to the name and wealth he was given in this form.

“It just made it easier to get the leader position.” By now he had to utter a lighting spell as it began to get dark. “Plus easier to fulfill my duties.”

“How was it easy? We’re talking about royalty here!”

“It’s easier because of the access and connections you get. I’m not the first prince to be a joker, Ludwig, just ask uncle Marcellus,” he shrugged.

“Please do not tell me uncle Marcellus-”

“He taught me everything. Contacts, incantations, laws, position, chose me as the heir even.” Something he was immensely proud of. “We’re needed more in the castle than you guys think. Do you honestly believe that Opa and Oma would have chosen that crazy route for you two? Na’, probably something worst. I had to step in.”

“So, you organized everything?” Feliciano glowed, following quite excitedly, Ludwig having to pay better attention for the both of them under the single dim light of Gilbert’s hand.

“Opa and Oma getting jokers to help? Trust me, they would have preferred to let you two die than send them.”

They turned now to a stabled floor hall, the end of their descend.

“Does that mean that you were the one who found the White Kingdom?”

“It was actually one of my men that caught a signal to them as we were guarding this area. I reached in and we offered your location as well as their invitation here. Begged them to keep a secret my part in this.”

“What were you guarding that caused this to happen?” Ludwig, attentive to everything.

“This door obviously.” And they arrived, Gilbert quickly presenting it, letting the light shows its intricate design of symbols, sprouting and growing from a center heart symbol where the keyhole and handle was located.

Feliciano had expected the door to be larger, but what a beauty it still was, already screaming so much of Augusta that Feliciano couldn’t help his touch, palming it as if he could touch her.

“Why?” Ludwig insisted to know, after falling to a moment of silence in its impression and majesty.

“Khaos found out about this room and what was in it. He constantly kept sending some of his escaping men to get it. Luckily we stood for a good fight.” He moved the light to show them the dark tunnel that continued to their right, turning then into a cave, surely that would lead out to another part of the city or perhaps even the outskirts. “He was trying to get in through here,” Gilbert pointed, before he brought the light back to the door…standing, clicking his tongue, staring at seemingly nothing, leaving quite an awkward silence between the three.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” Gilbert scolded.

“Um…” Feliciano raised.

“I still have so many questions,” Ludwig interrupted.

“I’ll give more explanations later. But this isn’t about me! This is about getting to know what’s in this door! It’s been taunting me ever since I read about it! Now come on! Open it! Open it! Open it!” He pushed Feliciano forward, tripping him and Ludwig having to catch him before he hit himself against the fated door.

It was simple, just take the key, put it into the keyhole and open, but Feliciano stood there and stared on as if it was a puzzle. He had the key in his hand, shaken up and down, but nowhere near to enter its place.

“What is this anticipation?” Gilbert was impatient and annoyed. Ludwig glared at him, in it hoping he would understand the patience the moment needed.

“I’m…nervous,” Feliciano admitted.

“Augusto told you it will be something that will help you. There’s nothing to fear,” Ludwig kindly told, interrupting whatever insisting Gilbert was going to say.

Ludwig was right, there was nothing to fear, nothing to attack. Augusto and Augusta wouldn’t cruelly leave him one last joke or even something that could hurt him. It was going to help, it was going to aid.

The last push was a little nuzzle from Pookie on his shoulder. He chuckled and finally inserted the key into is place.

It opened like any ordinary door, no loud click, no show of light, not even a loud hinge as they were expecting. Feliciano tested the movement of the door, easily moving at his pull and push. Sure, he pushed both the doors until he had the room in welcome to the three. It was not small, not something large to impress, but with space for the three to move in their own direction. Why would they though? The item was already placed at the center, atop a large alter, right under the only sunlight that came from an ancient glass window that was dirtied by the years. The item was well dusted, hiding the shinning gold under it, but once Feliciano could recognize it, the gasp was loud for Ludwig and Gilbert to startle in worry.

“What is it?” Gilbert feared.

“It’s Augusta’s harp!” Feliciano squealed and jumped, excitedly going about it, hands extending as if to embrace, but still so hesitant, never approaching to touch.

“A harp?” Gilbert didn’t find the grandeur of it.

“Augusta’s harp! Didn’t you listen to when Feliciano was telling her story in the meeting? This harp was the one she created herself. Music was probably created with it. She then used it as a weapon, having paralyzed Khaos the first time in the first heaven with it,” Ludwig explained since Feliciano was still too hypnotized by the item to speak.

“Wait…what? She seriously did?” Gilbert had to admit his impression.

“It was a huge symbol of her and she continued to use it for both music and as a weapon. I thought she destroyed it before her death,” Ludwig told, now letting himself the silence of wonder.

“Well, here it is,” Gilbert presented, “I think she wanted her next heir to have it.”

For him? For him?! It only froze Feliciano more in his reach.

“Come on! Touch it!” Gilbert wanted to see if it did something.

Exactly…what if it did something that Feliciano couldn’t control. Yet the curiosity won well over, Feliciano going up the small stairs until he was at the instruments level, not sure of which area he should rest his hand on. Gilbert was about to omit something to get him to hurry, but a deepened glare from Ludwig held him back into place. Feliciano settled with just giving a simple touch to the crown, a simple little thing that had it glowing for a moment in its real gold. Scared, he moved his hand back, like it had burned.

“It’s yours now, Feliciano. It’s not going to do anything that you don’t want it to,” Ludwig assured, hoping to get him more comfortable with the item.

The words helped to grant him more confidence, Feliciano determined to hold it completely to make it now his own. So, he quickly forced his hand to take an instant grasp of the pillar,

the harp shinning in gold and reds to the prolonged acceptance of its new master, still finding familiarity of its old one in the soul and spirit of the boy.

All dust left and now Feliciano could hold it in shinning new colors and power, bringing even more light than that of the small window.

“That looks epic,” Gilbert complimented, adding a whistle.

Once Feliciano let go, the glow disappeared, yet the harp stood ready for instant battle and song for when Feliciano wished its use. He took notice of the mess of parchments, scrolls and notebooks spread across the altar, on them notes and lyrics of old. Some were new, others familiar and then some that he knew well. He picked a simple one he could read easily, accompanied with notes of teaching, surely in Augusta’s writing, probably for when she taught one of her own two sons.

“There’s…music notes and lyrics here,” Feliciano told them, Ludwig and Gilbert going up as well to look through it.

Perhaps they could find something else of value.

As they did so, Feliciano decided that moment that he would make it possible to teach himself to play with these writings. He thought that it shouldn’t be that hard. He knew how to play the guitar and piano and thought them a similar learning process to a harp.

There was a sudden impulse, Feliciano feeling the harp’s need for use, so in a testing, he tried to ring a single string. Surely it needed a tuning and Feliciano realized that it should be the first thing he learned. He extended that single string. Extended, extended, extended, a large space between, and Feliciano…let go.

He forgot that the harp had made an instant connection to him, forgot that it was in well use and thus he was surprised at the bolt of light that escaped and quickly hit the other side.

The area shook, debris fell, Ludwig and Gilbert had to use the parchments to cover themselves from whatever fell from the ceiling. Even Feliciano and Pookie cowered, using the very harp as a shield from whatever could occur after that blow.

“Geez, Feli, be careful,” Gilbert scolded, rising once all had stopped and the area seemed safe again.

Ludwig rose quickly and went to aid Feliciano, who was still too surprised to properly stand. Ludwig kept his hands on his shoulder, soothing to help him breathe better and relax. “He’s right, you should be careful,” Ludwig had to say honestly.

“I’ll try… I just really need to practice,” Feliciano decided, taking the harp in a dear hold against him.

“We’ll arrange whatever necessary,” Ludwig smiled.

“And to be honest, guys, I don’t like being down here and would prefer we started heading up now. I have things to do.” Gilbert stretched ready to take that climb.

“Joker things?” Feliciano asked jokingly, agreeing that they should leave, the harp not so heavy in his hold.

“Sure, and you my little noodle, have to start practicing!” Gilbert pointed, placing a poke on his nose Feliciano giggled at while Ludwig glared.

“Are you going to keep guarding that cave now that I have the harp?” Feliciano wondered as they began their descend from the altar.

“It’s a weak opening, anyone can try to get into the castle through it. We still have to keep an eye on it,” Gilbert knew, leading them back the way they entered with his light, their conversations an echo through the deepened dark halls.

The item had waited for centuries in that room and now it was safe with a new holder.

Before he would use it…to kill, Feliciano decided that he would first learn to play the instrument. As promised to a new routine of practicing, he sat with Augusta’s harp in the Queen’s study room, the only place where he would have the peace and solitude he needed.

Other than the parchments in the ancient room, he also took some more modern books about a harp’s specific teachings, wanting to have all the help and approaches he could get. Pookie was his only spectator, rested on a small table while Feliciano rung and tested his first melodies.

They could be better, they weren’t full, sometimes it would break, but at least he was making some small progress for the simple days that have passed since the discovery of the item.

Queen Louis didn’t mind and most of the time left him alone for when he seemed frustrated. Today was one of those days, as Feliciano was finding it hard to reach a certain section for the turn of a melody and hadn’t stopped repeating that very part until it was well mastered. It was in another miss that the doors opened, Kiku’s figure making his way close, some books and old documents in his hands.

“I hope I’m not interrupting,” he said, taking siting in a near chair.

“No, no, I’m just…failing at this part.” He moved the harp aside so Kiku could speak to him properly.

“I’m sure you will do it soon, you have already done so much.”

“Thanks, it’s just…not been as easy as I thought,” he saddened, but once he noticed the documents and books Kiku brought, he decided to distract himself in them. “What are these?”

Kiku smiled, placing all of them on the desk between them. “It’s about the annulment of the engagement.”

Kiku was expecting a much wider reaction, after all, before Feliciano had left on the journey, they had been working so hard on finding something like this. Instead Feliciano seemed hesitant, his smile faltering, hands fisting but still willing to listen, so Kiku began.

“One of Khaos’s books talked about these kinds of annulments,” he presented that very familiar book. "A ritual is required, along with these items, which I checked, and we have them all at our disposal. The current Jack can perform it and we can arrange it next week if you wish. We do have to make and sign a lot of documents assuring that the current royals and the arising ones agree with the annulment beforehand, but I’m sure we’ll all give our signatures on time.”

“Oh that’s…wonderful, Kiku.” He still sounded as dejected and weakened, taking all the documents and books and just giving them a simple eye, quickly pushing them away uninterested.

“What’s the matter? Isn’t this what you wanted?” Kiku wondered.

“It was, but I think…” Feliciano took them once again, opening and better organizing them, then closing in the holding of one of the books. “We should leave it here for future generations,” he decided with a smile as sure.

“Future generations?”

“Yes, others might need it more than we do right now. I mean…things are…kind of different now and maybe…maybe Ludwig and I…Ludwig and I…” Feliciano blushed and Kiku smirked.

“Let’s just…wait,” Feliciano managed to say lastly about it, direction his face elsewhere so Kiku wouldn’t notice the hope and expectation for something that seemed like it was back on the plans. “Is…that okay?”

“Completely okay.”

Kiku found better relief in knowing that perhaps he would be Jack to a married King and Queen.

Chapter 59

As with every instrument Feliciano practiced with, the very first song he learned to play on the harp was ‘Accept to be mine’. It was a melodic stirring that filled the gardens in awe, in halt to the work of whatever servants worked there, even the Queen couldn’t focus on the reading she was giving Feliciano. She eased into it, resting upon its tune, swayed in a delicate cloud, and to be honest, Feliciano joined her in it too despite how it was being made by his own hand. In that floating state, he lost whatever rhythm and the harp answered to his mistake violently.

There was a sudden burst of light and luckily Feliciano aimed it out of danger on time, into a slight jump in the air where it then exploded into ice. Queen Louis and Feliciano were covered in a sudden blanket of snow, harshly awaking them from the intense dream state they were in. Feliciano prepared for a harsh scold, but it seemed to disappear from Louis’s thoughts when Pookie emerged from his own cover, the most surprised and startled, an adorability that Louis couldn’t help but laugh. Pookie found his cover of heat once again with Feliciano, who freed his hold on the harp to hold his little winged lion instead, cuddling him into his cheek, only intensifying his smile and laugh.

Ludwig was supposed to be as dedicated to his own readings, but he distracted with that beautiful smile that was the star of the entire view of the garden from the King’s study room. He slumped well into the glass, hoping to reach him that very moment.

“Ludwig!” Aldrich had called again, loudly, starling the other from his love-struck stupefaction. “Boy, listen to me, we’re reading important clauses concerning animal abuse laws,” he scolded.

“I-I’m sorry, Opa.” He forced his eyes back on the reading.

“What were you staring at anyways?” The king stood himself to check and when he noticed the young arising queen playing with his St. Mark, leaving his own harp practicing and readings with his wife, he smirked in understanding.

“Ah, your heart and land,” Aldrich chuckled, easily earning a flush from Ludwig. “How have things been with him lately?” He wondered, not minding this break from their teachings, putting the book down and getting ready for a chat.

“To be honest, we have been too busy with our practices to really do much. Our times together are at dinner or in our bedroom, which I don’t think are enough.”

“Enough for what?” Ludwig’s answer was interrupted by Kiku’s entrance, in his arms scrolls and books, surely with questions and duties.

“Aldrich,” he bowed, “I have the writings concerning internal dark magic processing.”

“In a minute, Kiku, Ludwig here is dealing with emotional issues.”

“Uuu!” And Kiku sat as if this was a theater play to watch.

“Don’t make fun of me.”

“We are not, we just want to help.”

“You can start by giving me ideas this instant,” Ludwig groaned.

“You did say there is an issue with time.”

“You could always try to take lessons and practices with him, or for both of you to finish as soon as possible or organize them for other times,” Kiku suggested.

“Your relationship is important to the kingdom as well and I will set aside what I can,” Aldrich already promised.

“Good, now there’s the issue of what to do with that time.”

Aldrich and Kiku remained in silence as they thought, meeting in a gaze as if to judge if their ideas would be enough.

“Well, your grandmother and I did the very traditional. Strolls through the gardens, private dinners in our room, the typical…flower and chocolate gifting.”

“I’m sorry, your majesty, but that is all too dull. I don’t think it will be the ideal for Ludwig and Feliciano, after all this is another generation we’re speaking about,” Kiku added.

“Um…singing,” still Aldrich awkwardly suggested, which earned raised eyebrows, surely denying.

“No, something more them, something that will have them sparking, something…” Kiku snapped his fingers as if trying to fetch the idea to come. He caught a small portrait of Ludwig as a child, and with it he was reminded. “Feliciano told me you made a lot of promises you didn’t keep.”

It was not something Ludwig wanted to be reminded of, but he sighed in embarrassed disappointment.

“Then fulfill them!”

“We were kids when we made them. We were naïve, we didn’t know anything.”

“What does that matter! It was something you both wanted in the past. I’m sure some of them can be something you can enjoy now. It will be a sweet token that you will both appreciate! It will mean that you’re trying and that you want a deeper relationship to grow! Now, think of one!”

It was immediate to Ludwig, who stood as the idea began to grow in his head. “I got it.”

It was a long climb up, stairs after stairs that Ludwig went up ready and confidently, while Feliciano had to stop every level to take deep breaths and internally cry every time he looked up to the still missing heights to take.

“I hope-I hope…you’re showing me a room full of gold!” Feliciano concocted as they must have reached the highest point in the castle, no other stairs, only a single hall with a long window at the end that showed the heights they took. There was a single door to a single room, whatever Ludwig wanted to show him there.

Feliciano practically let himself faint once he reached, almost hugging the floor in relief. Ludwig chuckled, helping him up and presenting him before the room. “You remember when we were kids… that I told you I would give you a painting room…with the best light and everything you would need.”

“I honestly thought you had forgotten,” Feliciano had to sadden.

“I might have acted harsh, Feliciano, but I never forgot.” Ludwig took a better grasp of both his hands, exciting them both the more. Ludwig couldn’t hold it any longer and pushed open the doors, lighting the entire hall in a brightening as if the very sun was caught in this room. Feliciano was momentarily blinded, letting the gold die down until he could notice that the reason for all this light was the coverage of long and wide windows across the circularity of this room. The marbled floor and the pillars that surrounded helped to make more of that bounce, some curtains of red from the walls present for if lessening was wanted. Oh, but Feliciano loved this light, he entered with an opening of arms, letting it embrace him wonderfully. When it had been enough, he finally noticed the items that loitered around the room. Easels, canvases, fabrics, cloths, paint, so many jars of paint in different boxes, some in different shelves, an array of colors that Feliciano hadn’t even tried before.

“What…what is this?” Feliciano wondered, spinning and only meeting more items that were the ideal for any artist.

“Royal painting room. Been used by several of our monarchs for centuries, has been so because of this.” Ludwig ushered Feliciano forward to the edge of the windows, Feliciano’s eyes widened at the immensity of the city shown, its forest of vicinity, the hills that surrounded, even the far sea that separated them from the Scandinavian area of the kingdom.

“This is the highest point in the castle!” After that climb, it was only obvious to Feliciano. “Yes, everything you want to see in your reach, non-ending inspiration and the best light in all the castle, and all yours.” He moved to place his hands on his shoulders, turning Feliciano once again to the area of work, already an infinity of things to do that fell instantly on Feliciano’s mind.

“Re-really?” He was kind of hesitant to reach any of the items, but the temptation was so clear.

“Yes! So take it, start! I know you want to.” Ludwig pushed him slowly and although Feliciano remained in his standing, frozen for seconds on, he interrupted it with a loud laugh, an excited jump, but not before turning, taking Ludwig in an embrace and kiss of potency, passion, as brightening as the sun that reigned in the room.

When they departed, dazed and flying, Feliciano whispered in a seductive tone: “Thank you.”

Ludwig didn’t know words anymore, his entire being was still flying in the magic that is always Feliciano’s kisses. He answered in silence and whispered stutters. Feliciano chuckled and removed himself to quickly pick from one of the many canvases, to put on an easel in a good center, plotting his ideas as he used his hands to picture how he could organize and set what he was still thinking. Ludwig picked a stool and settled it close to him, content enough in taking a simple seating.

Feliciano looked to him as if he had committed a crime. “Oh no, you’re sitting right next to me, Luddy!” Feliciano stood to force him into his closeness, Ludwig rolling his eyes but accepting.

Feliciano picked the softest and most fitting brushes that adjusted well to his hold, the prettiest jar of colors, some cloths for effects and he didn’t mind with getting something to cover his clothes. Who cared if he got them spotted with fine colors, he already wanted to stroke and paint and he wasn’t going to have anymore interruptions.

“How about… a nice snowy day in Berlin,” Feliciano imagined, raising a brush into the air as if to declare it. “What do you think?”

“You’re the one whose painting. You decide whatever you wish.”

“What do you mean I’m the only one whose painting?” And that’s when Ludwig was reminded of how exactly that promise had gone long ago.

Feliciano smirked, surely ready to impose.

“No,” Ludwig already decided.

“Come on! How many times do we have to go through this?”

“Until I have convinced you enough that I am terrible.”

“You aren’t!”

“Seems I still have work to do…”

“Just… like we used to, just like we did when were in the Oralee.” The reminder of that sweetened moment, one of the first in their opening, gave a weakening, a smile, one that had Ludwig docile enough for Feliciano to pull his arm, forcing both to a unity of that brush hold.

Ludwig sighed and settled once again to Feliciano’s wishes, both starting a baby blue stroke in a beginning. The comfort gave him quite a confidence for something grandiose even with his mediocre skills. Feliciano was there, smiling up at him, sure to love whatever they created together. And so, they stayed and gave themselves all the time they wanted in a room of color, inspiration and strengthening love.

“Und frische Nahrung, neues Blut Saug ich aus freier Welt: Wie ist Natur so hold und gut, Die mich am Busen hält!!” Ludwig read as warm, as the embrace that Feliciano needed with the coming near cold.

“Die Welle wieget unsern Kahn Im Rudertakt hinauf, Und Berge, wolkig himmelan, Begegnen unserm Lauf.” Ludwig had a sitting in one of the near chairs, deciding on a standing and joining Feliciano, who was seated on the floor, right in front of a window, a new large sketchbook in his hand that he was using dark pastels on to recreate the rain that was currently falling.

“Aug, mein Aug, was sinkst du nieder? Goldne Träume, kommt ihr wieder? Weg, du Traum! so gold du bist: Hier auch Lieb und Leben ist.“ He sat close, in a clear touch, a hand holding him behind him.

Feliciano suddenly stopped in his drawing, instead smiling up to Ludwig at the words that he found so lovely even though he couldn’t understand it completely.

“You sound so wonderful in German,” Feliciano said dreamily.

Ludwig smirked, continuing. “Auf der Welle blinken, Tausend schwebende Sterne, Weiche Nebel trinken, Rings die türmende Ferne.“ Now Ludwig laid his head upon Feliciano’s as he read on, as Feliciano sketched, both somehow managing to do their activities through the blush, the high activity of love streaming through their bodies that did well to heat the room.

“Morgenwind umflügelt, Die beschattete Bucht, Und im See bespiegelt, Sich die reifende Frucht..“

“Feliciano, Ludwig, there is need of opinions for the-” Queen Louis’s voice could be hidden well out of the wall that was built to keep the moment fresh and lovely to themselves.

The Queen watched with adoring eyes at the scene, too beautiful to just depart, to miss such growth, such a reminder of a past that she thought would never repeat.

“Your majesty, the power con-”

“Shh, look at this,” she interrupted the messenger sent, pointing to the two figures sitting beside each other so warmly.

The messenger, even with the weigh of many duties, breathed and awed. “It’s nice to see them be so lovely together,” she admitted.

“Yes, yes, so much,” Louis agreed, finding more treasure in the caress Ludwig gave Feliciano’s hips. “There is more yet!” She assured, confident and loud even if she had only whispered the words to the other. “Come now, is this about the power containments?” She already moved aside, attentive once again, leaving the messenger behind, who almost tumbled as she turned and took her pace.

“And that’s…200 cookies!” Feliciano gave that last count, closing the oven with the last addition.

“Great!” And still Ludwig was mixing something else.

Feliciano giggled as he rested his head on his hands, a cute lean on the counter, staring with the ever-growing fire of love in his eyes. “Aren’t 200 cookies enough?” He joked.

The others that were already done sat in piles of decorated plates to the side. Feliciano, since he had helped in the majority of the day with the baking, thought there wouldn’t be a problem if he reached for one. It was stopped by a hit of Ludwig’s spoon.

“Hey!” Feliciano pained, rubbing the forming red in his hand.

“They’re for later. A little bit of patience, liebling.” Oh, how Feliciano was adoring being called that. It almost made the sting go away completely.

“I thought of making some cinnamon rolls just for us. You still like them?”

“I’ve never stopped,” Feliciano laughed.

“This won’t let me make 200, but it can make us a couple,” Ludwig smiled, the dough ready to be formed.

“I’m sure I’m going to love them!”

That moment, a visitor came, luckily his robes familiar, Kiku taking a seating by one of the many stools. “I must say, Ludwig, I’m really glad you took this baking hobby,” he admitted, loving the smell, or just how happily and calm his arising king and queen turned each day, a new forming of all kinds of activities that did more than just the duties they had kept to before their journey.

“He’s improved like you have no idea,” Feliciano cheekily added.

“The last time you had something I baked, we were ten. How was I supposed to properly do this as a kid?” Ludwig excused.

“I’m glad you practiced through the years.”

“I completely stopped after Romulus’s letter.” Ludwig placed the bowl on the counter, dreading the memory, yet feeling its depressing grasped all over again.

“It’s going to be fine. We’re training, preparing and I’m sure we’ll take Khaos when the times comes. But, let’s focus on what we’re doing now.” Feliciano took Ludwig’s hand in assurance and they smiled to each other confident, indeed just settling in the light and smells of this kitchen.

In that distraction, Kiku neared his hand to one of the piles, thinking he could sneak in a cookie. He was stopped by another hit of Ludwig’s spoon.

There was a mess of planning, scheduling and notes in Feliciano's desk, and the aid of a playing baby that said arising queen was helping to the growing of this disruption wasn't ideal to the current queen.

"Feliciano, are you sure you should have Augustino here?"

To be honest, Louis hadn't been able to concentrate with the baby's babbling, cries and Feliciano's coos. How he had managed to work throughout the holding of his nephew was quite a feat.

"I promised Lovino and Antonio to take care of him while they trained. I want to be a present and loving uncle. I want to be with him whenever possible," he tried to convince, placing a quick kiss on the baby's head while the other hand wrote on some documents on the desk.

It was quite adoring to see Feliciano deal so well with children while working well at the same time. It assured her of a proper father for a future heir, as well as someone who could keep well to his queenly duties despite so.

"If you want, I can go to another room," Feliciano suggested.

"No, no. Just make sure to calm him, all right?"

Feliciano nodded and they both could focus on these preparations.

"Are we going with the ground ballroom?" Feliciano asked.

"Do you think it's the best idea?" Queen Louis had learned after the first ball experience to trust Feliciano with his choices.

"I believe so. Every royal from every kingdom will be coming, and I'm also thinking of inviting many others, so we will have plenty of people from different kingdoms. Because of the space and access, I think it would be best." He signed the document officiating it, decided.

"What about rooming? Will you take those guests into the castle too?"

"We have the space and I've already spoken to the servants about availability and cleaning." He even made a drawing and raised it to show the proof of his word. She smiled in deep pride.

A clear beautiful night in the kingdom, and Ludwig and Feliciano didn't waste it, rested well together in a comfortable couch they placed in the balcony. They took all its corner in a ball of themselves, Feliciano dressed in that very comfortable free robe Francis had giving him when they were in Paris.

With Ludwig, his own free pants and shirt, glasses of wine in their hands, pure bliss in their expressions, it was the scene of royalty and riches that anybody expected for the arising king and queen. Closed were their eyes, every breeze another caress to get them to sleep just like this, out in the open as held together they had lately slept in their bed.

“Hey,” Ludwig tried to awaken as sweetly as he could, raising Feliciano more into a proper sitting.

“Luddy…I was almost falling asleep,” Feliciano groaned, having to rub away whatever had caught him. “I know, I’m sorry, but…I was meaning to suggest something we could do this weekend.” He noticed that they had some time of freedom, one deserving after what they had gone through in the week, their instructors feeling that they needed rest and calmed minds before they continued with another wave of harsh responsibilities.

“Hmm…mud bathing,” Feliciano relaxed at not only the soothing of it, but of the fun and play that could come.

“Feliciano…no.”

“Then what…tell me already.” He was still sleepy and wanted to crash as soon as Ludwig omitted this plan.

“There’s an island, north of the German province, reaching well into the Scandinavian provinces, called Norderney. It’s not exactly the beaches we saw in the Oralee, or the Grecian islands or even the ones from Italy, but it’s still a great place to swim with peculiar things that are worth seeing. My family has a cabin there and I really don’t think they would mind us taking it for the time.”

With the swaying Feliciano maintained, eyes fluttering constantly in temptation to sleep, Ludwig had worried he hadn’t even listened.

“That sounds wonderful, Luddy. But-” he yawned and stretched, then wrapped his arms well around Ludwig’s torso- “why do you want to go?”

Ludwig sighed, “I made a promise to take you everywhere, didn’t I?”

Feliciano smiled and blushed so adorably. “Didn’t we kind of do that for the last couple of months?” He chuckled.

“We did, but it was mostly because we had a duty to fulfill. I want to do something more fun and just…for us,” Ludwig wanted to coax.

Feliciano cuddled more into his chest, smiling deep, imagining the awe that will surely lay in this trip. “Will we go tomorrow?”

It was sudden, and Ludwig wondered if Feliciano just said it in a dreamy haze. Yet…it was possible and even better.

“Yes.” It was decided.

“My Tino, Tino, Gustino, Augustino.”

“Stop singing João’s stupid ass song!” Lovino scolded, holding out his arm to have his son back. Feliciano gave him, but not before leaving him a long kiss on the top of his head.

His little nephew was already a month old, more adorable each day, growing, smiley and energetic.

“Aw, I’ll miss him so much!”

“Feliciano…we’re only leaving for three days.”

“Still!” He slammed his hands on the side of his thighs.

Ludwig grinned, “come on, let’s get going.”

Ludwig took Feliciano’s hand and lead him forward down the castle entrance steps, to an awaiting carriage at the bottom, only but simple bags over their shoulders.

“Don’t get too frisky!” Lovino called from his spot.

Ludwig froze, and Feliciano rolled his eyes, “we won’t!”

Just as they arrived before the carriage, about ready to take their entrance, Pookie huffed angrily on Feliciano’s shoulder.

“Pookie, what is it?” Feliciano wondered. His little St. Mark had never reacted this way when getting on a carriage.

Cocky, with a prideful shake, fly, and walk to the pavement, he took a stance and let the growing magic run over him. The light he was engulfed in grew and grew, until the large beast was before them again, wings expanded, prepared, ready, but Ludwig and Feliciano didn’t understand for what, remaining in their stand confused.

“Uh…what does he want?” Ludwig asked.

Pookie seemed impatient, ready to growl out his distaste. He shook his bottom, laid even more on the ground, and pointed with his wings to his back, then expanding them even more.

“I think he wants us to…get on him,” Feliciano understood. He gave some steps closer, the idea one that settled well on his head, wanting to take those wings and let them fly off with the wind as any creature of the sky.

Ludwig could see his interest, but he was still suspicious, remaining still by the carriage. “What? No. That is highly dangerous!” He tried to bring sense to both the animal and his arising queen, but neither gave head.

“But…he really wants us to,” Feliciano pointed.

“You really want to!”

“Yes! Come on! Let’s try it out.” It seemed Feliciano was already decided, coming near and trying to find a way in which he could mount without causing too much weigh on Pookie. Ludwig still stood by the carriage, looking to the horses as if expecting them to help him convince these two.

Feliciano was now well placed, excited, smiling already at what this kind of traveling would be. He could imagine himself riding exactly like Augusta did in her depictions, into battle or whatever unknown sunsets in the horizon. Ludwig still stood apart not wanting any of that.

“Luddyyyyy,” Feliciano whined.

“We’re not flying!”

“This is Pookie! He wouldn’t let anything happen to us! Besides, it’s new and it would be really fun! Come on, let’s try it out!” Feliciano continued to persuade, with a deep wish in his eyes that Ludwig was slowly falling weak to.

He gave up, although huffing, with arms angrily wrapped on his chest, his nearing steps as loud and mad. He gave a quick signal for some of the near servants to save the carriage and horses, taking sitting on the winged lion behind Feliciano. It took him a while to really get comfortable, Pookie so annoyed Feliciano feared he would knock out Ludwig on purpose.

“If anything happens…we’re taking horses back,” Ludwig warned.

“Yes! And don’t worry, everything will be all right!” He smiled back to him. “Now, hold on to me.” Feliciano could feel Pookie going through his preparation to fly off at the instant the wind took him.

“I think I’m good like this.”

“Are you?” Feliciano really wanted him to think, but it was already too late. Pookie’s wings were spread and he blasted off into the heights, in a moment having them even higher than the castle. Both had panicked, Feliciano holding tightly to the fur and having to lay his face in it, the rush of the wind hitting badly. Ludwig, after an unceremoniously shout, realized he had no other holding than Feliciano, wrapping his arms rather strongly around him, leaving Feliciano breathless as Pookie adjusted well into the air.

After a fearsome spin, a leaning and then another rush of altitude, Pookie finally found his settling, now calm, a smooth direction to north on an outing of the city. At this point, the breeze became calm, the ride peaceful, Ludwig and Feliciano could dispatch themselves from whatever hiding and actually look appropriately around them.

What a beautiful glow of the setting sun, the spread of colors of their capital city, of red mountains, bountiful villages, shinning rivers and lakes, all in a radius of freedom and reaches that made them more ruling than any powerful throne they could be given. There was a running of emotion as if they could feel every life moving below them, the horizons showing a liberation of places to explore and never reach limits. It brought ease and content

to the riders, falling in ease, no fear blinding them any longer from the majesty of it all. Pookie seemed to grin and raise his head in pride…but with a shake of his mane that gave an awakening slap to Feliciano, he reminded that there was still a place to reach.

“Oh, yeah,” Feliciano remembered, bringing his hands back to the hold of the mane as a wheel to their flight. Feliciano tested it out, Pookie obediently following whatever direction he decided to move him toward to.

“Where to?” Feliciano asked Ludwig. He was the one that knew well the direction to Norderney and they very much depended on him for that.

Ludwig took a better look at their surroundings, to the routes that looked diminutive and the landmarks but specks below. “West through Grunewald,” he could identify, and they could begin.

Feliciano nodded as did Pookie, and the lion turned to fly over the familiar forest. Onward for the first time on the back of a St. Mark.

Lovino had watched it all from the comfort of the castle, not being able to hide how impressed he was by the spectacle of watching his brother fly off on Pookie like in ancient stories. Augustino was just as wondered, his eyes following their dot even as it disappeared in the distance.

“I hope your uncle doesn’t teach you to be that crazy.”

Chapter 60

Chapter Notes

> So this might be the last chapter I post here in Puerto Rico before leaving again. In my new set of travels, of course I will write when I can, but I'll be going back to a relative slowness. I hope you understand and than you enjoy this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ludwig had to admit that it had been an enchanting ride.

Every spectacle from their height was new and shinning, more colors spreading, more for their eyes to see play in action and bring to life even the very colors of the sky. To be honest, when Ludwig had pointed to their spot of landing, he was glad to had been behind Feliciano, so he wouldn't see the utter disappointment for when the wind and exhilaration left, once again on harshened ground, like awakened from a lively dream.

"It's so small," Feliciano giggled once he saw this home.

It was a little cabin, desolated, no flowers, no neighbors, lonely in this field, only two routes available, one to the near sea, the other to the center of the village. It was in hazes of red, surely needing a new fresh coat of paint as someone hadn't come to properly take care of it in years.

Ludwig shrugged, "I did say it wouldn't be a big deal."

Pookie now having been transformed to his small self, took his perch on Feliciano's shoulder, ready for whatever plans his master held. Ludwig ushered them inside, up wood that creaked under their footing, the front door opening in just the same sounds, revealing a dusty home that had Pookie already coughing. It was dark, limited furniture, but at least it had a decent space and Feliciano smiled despite.

"I'm…sorry it's so dirty." Ludwig was feeling heavy embarrassment.

"Nothing that can be fixed quickly."

A reminder that Feliciano was not one to enjoy cleaning, always wanted it quick and easily done with no trouble to anyone. It was because of this that he sometimes learned spells or magic for cleaning, mastering them to the point that with enough concentration, a bit of his Ace power, and a snap of his fingers, the cabin was released of all dust, as shinning as if the servants had done their most amazing job.

Ludwig, from impressed, then turned towards Feliciano with a scolding glare. "What?" Feliciano didn't find anything wrong knowing this magic.

“Unbelievable. You’re this lazy!” Ludwig joked as he made his entrance, wanting to organize and better accommodate themselves in the area before they could do anything else.

“Well if you wanted to do everything by hand and take time away from our holiday, go ahead, I would have sat by a chair drinking a milkshake.”

They didn’t want to waste any more time when there were places around them they wanted to see. They spent that first day in the village, a beautiful colored one that Feliciano didn’t mind getting to know the people and dining in their singular foods. Well, to be honest, Feliciano hated it and Ludwig had ended up taking him back to the cabin to cook something more at his preference. The bed was not the heavenly comfort of their own back in the castle, but it was sufficient enough, soft under their skins, not cough or sickness inducing, letting a delightful sea breeze enter through the small window they left open as another blanket.

To Ludwig’s surprise, it was Feliciano that woke him early the next morning, excited about waves, sand and games they could try.

In one of their singular bags they placed everything they would both need for their outing, Feliciano running off with it the moment Ludwig allowed it. He shone freely in those shorts, in that opened blouse shirt that surely must have belonged to a celebrated designer who made it specifically for royals, especially only for balls or special occasions. Ludwig didn’t bother in scolding him for it, he was starting to understand Feliciano’s views in wearing whatever for whenever and that the only thing that mattered was his comfort and how easily he could move in it. Also…he had to admit Feliciano looked incredibly adorable in them.

Ludwig already felt bliss the moment his feet touched the cold sand, especially in seeing this area of the beach so lonely, all that blue immensity for them. Feliciano seemed just as excited, for he jumped and twirled with Pookie, ready to run all the coast and Ludwig had no doubt that he would dare. He let him, taking out an umbrella and settling under the extra shade as he read on some notes he made concerning one of Khaos’s books, more specifically that of inner cleansing of darkness. He had re-read enough by the time Feliciano had returned from his run, laughing with Pookie flying in circles above him.

“Ludwig!” He called, sounding angry. “I thought we were taking a break from our teachings and readings!”

“Reading still helps me relax.”

“Come on, you’re joining me.” Feliciano went and pulled him from his spot, Ludwig letting himself the reach of the gentle waves that got to their feet at the shore.

“Joining you in what exactly?”

Feliciano smirked, giving Pookie a messaging smile, the little lion understanding, using his frontal jewel to transport as they had seen he could do. Right between the two royals fell a ball, one of football Ludwig could easily recognize, rolling his eyes because he instantly understood.

“Are you sure?” Ludwig grinned, competitive.

“I used to have so much fun beating you every time,” Feliciano smirked, already bouncing the ball between his knees.

“It wasn’t that often!”

“If I recall correctly, you only beat me once,” Feliciano was haughty, striding quite provocatively around the area as he prepared his starting spot.

Ludwig was accepting the taunts, preparing his own stance of defense. “We’ll see about that.”

And it was with that dare they had begun, their ports but rocks in the sand that they did well to protect. They had mostly kept even numbers, both showcasing the growth of their tactics and moves as the ball went between earth and water, beginning purposed splashes to wet the other more.

At some point it was less about the points and more about the laughs as they ran, fell and even swam about. The ball was then forgotten, throwing each other water and sand instead, until they tired and landed to the ground together in defeat, taking in their breaths in laughter. After they gained sufficient energy, they let the water drag them more into their depths, floating in relaxation, taking a dip from time to time to then come back to their holding, to the trust of their kisses and the thread of their fingers on one another. But there was so much cold they could take, shivering all the way to shore, groaning when they noticed how far off the cabin was and how they would have to return this wet and exposed. Luckily, they had Pookie, who smiled and offered his assistance. A transformation and he kneeled to offer their ride. Both smiled to each and took an instant mount, the air doing well to dry them, whatever cold they could feel up here ignored in favor of the views, of the freedom, of their shouts and pretends of their extending arms, wanting them to be Pookie’s magnificent wings. Feliciano had them spinning well around the area, passing the cabin and into other directions, seeing more of this shore and even of the other near villages in the island.

This new art of flying Pookie was one they were adjusting to and enjoying, always wanting this flight, always wanting to stay in the skies. Pookie could tire though, he needed his rest before he could take them back for the night, so he settled with bringing them to the height of a cliff, on the only mountain in the entire island. While they waited for him to take his rest, Pookie did not mind at all as Feliciano and Ludwig took his body to lay upon. It was soft and Pookie’s slow breathing did quite the lulling, but they couldn’t really let themselves that rest with the beauty of the sea, of the stars coming into view, of the festive lights below with the routine of the people. It made Ludwig question why his ancestors did not build that home up here. He also wondered if it wasn’t selfish to ask for a new home to be built in this area once he was king. This would be a wonderful place to go on weekends with his queen after…oh right.

He looked down to his queen, his adoring, wonderful, sweet and most beautiful queen. Feliciano took quite a comfort on Ludwig’s chest, well wrapped on him and seeming ready to remain there for the whole night, sleep if he had to, like he hadn’t done it already.

It was amazing how petite, innocent and fragile Feliciano looked that moment…when he was an Ace, when he was to be his queen, to rule, destined to defeat an immense evil and bring peace to their ancestors and even the heavens.

How many times had he already told himself to push away how time ticked, of the imminent and fearsome future that lay ahead. Like Feliciano had told enough, he should focus on how comfortable he lay in his hold, on the sweetness he could have for himself, each and every time only solidifying what he should do next, what he should claim before the surely devastating depart to heaven.

Enjoy every minute, every second, every coming moment of peace.

“I know what I should do now,” he found himself wording aloud.

“Should do what?” Feliciano perked, looking up to him now with widened eyes.

Ludwig wanted to hit himself for this compulsive speak. “Nothing.” He hoped Feliciano would forget, letting his eyes remain on the star and sea so Feliciano could follow his gaze there to remain as well.

“I can’t believe we’ve grown to be this disgusting,” Feliciano laughed.

“What are you talking about?” Ludwig joined.

“About all this.” Feliciano poked Ludwig’s nose with a single finger, then rising slightly to lay a quick kiss on his lips, then back to cuddling to his neck.

Ludwig would never stop getting so flustered, with hits of wonder and stars whenever he was kissed by Feliciano. “I…I don’t think it’s disgusting,” Ludwig shied, wrapping his arms more strongly around Feliciano, pulling him much closer.

Feliciano smiled, agreeing with another kiss on his cheek. “But, you know, one of those many promises was not being like this,” he chuckled.

“I didn’t think I would…fall this way for you,” Ludwig admitted with a beautiful blush, one that had Feliciano glowing, tracing his fingers on that red of his cheek, faint under this moonlight.

“I didn’t think so either,” Feliciano whispered, but oh he didn’t mind it, he didn’t mind at all having fallen for his best friend, to continue these cuddles and kisses that would have had their childish selves gagging and looking away.

“I’m sorry…but that promise I have to break. I enjoy being…this disgusting with you.” Ludwig laid him well in his arm, for one hand to be able to traverse him well, giving Feliciano delightful shivers that brought heat.

“As do I,” Feliciano whispered, his fingers now tracing his lips. “I hope we can always be this disgusting.” They laughed before they crashed their lips, feasting on their smiles against one another, moistened movements that darkened everything around them, now only red and fire, ignited in magic, more glowing than the stars and more breezing than the air. Pookie

rolled his eyes and had to smack them with one of his wings to get them to stop. They laughed but took this as a sign that he was well energized and could take them on a flight back to their cabin.

Although the wind had done well drying, their clothes were still in a damp they wanted instant riding of, so the moment they headed inside, Feliciano was the first to remove his blouse, landing it carelessly in the room as he tousled his curls to rid of any sand. Ludwig busied by lighting the room, not paying attention to Feliciano until a sudden turn, halted then by the light on him, bringing his body a shine that did callings that Ludwig shouldn't answer to if he wanted this night to remain innocent. But he was weak, he found himself reaching, extending his hands to have them in a warming wrap around that heavenly body. Feliciano had stood, landing his back well against Ludwig's chest as he had finished, turning only his face to smile in enchantment, with stars that looked like he had brought inside with him. And so Ludwig came down to kiss the dust of his lips, turning him until he had him well wrapped, Feliciano's own hands on his back, playing with his hair and neck, blazing with that union more a fire in their loins.

Their touches danced for more, and in their twirls, they led themselves to the bed, in a heaped mess of traversing hands, of legs expanding and pushing. Ludwig made himself comfortable between it all, hands now daring through all the expanses of his bared legs, while Feliciano rid Ludwig of his own shirt and enjoyed from the strength under his fingertips. He wanted all of it well laid on him, so he wrapped his arms strongly around him and pulled him more into him, to the still blazing kiss, one so blinding that it let themselves the freedom from a royal restriction, one that tried to repress how strongly they wanted to show this desire.

There came a grinding motion that brought delighted moans, shouted uncaring to the ceiling, confident with the loneliness of this cabin in the area. Ludwig wanted more of that skin, so he began a passing down his jaw, his neck, making sure to leave all the markings, all the love that he wanted shown, continuing in his voyage down his chest until…he met face to face with the promise necklace.

Despite being in the middle of that heat, his own hands now under Feliciano's underwear, fingertips so near to his voluptuous backside, Ludwig halted, letting them finally a space to breathe and dim themselves down.

There came thought, there came reminders, none more stronger than the cross that laid well on Feliciano's chest. In that very moment, Ludwig hated it above everything, sending it glares, thinking it to be taunting, caging well whatever that could have continued.

"This is a damn accursed thing," Ludwig uttered, letting his fingers play with the pendant.

Feliciano laughed, raising his hips to meet more with the growing strength in Ludwig's center. It was meant to be playful, Feliciano didn't expect it to have Ludwig groaning and having to hold himself well with a heavy grip on the sheets of his bed, teeth baring and biting into his lips like an animal.

"You were the one that gave it to me and I wore it faithfully and unknowingly because it was from you," Feliciano told with true honesty in his eyes. "Why did you even send it? Did you even know what it meant?" He had been wondering for a while.

“Yes…I did. I was a teenager, possessive, I wanted you all for myself and couldn’t stand thinking about you being like that with…someone else,” Ludwig shied and blushed, all in beautiful colors that made Feliciano smile, his hands now raising to caress at his face, lovingly and instilling confidence.

“Even without this necklace, I would have saved myself for you still. I couldn’t think of myself with anybody else and I can assure you that I will be yours only.” He pulled him down for a sweet quick kiss. “But you have to promise as well that you’ll be mine only too,” he giggled and poked Ludwig’s nose in a coax.

“I have been for a long time,” Ludwig chuckled in turn, now comfortably laid between Feliciano, the heat having died down and only a want for lips and then rest.

Ludwig gave one last glance to the necklace, a sigh escaping knowing that he still had to wait.

“I think it’s sweet that we’re waiting until marriage. For us it will be special and meaningful, and it can be like an added gift. The gods will be proud that we held such a powerful promise.”

Ludwig agreed, smiling and settling well down into Feliciano’s neck, arms well wrapped around him, yawning and eyes in a shut ready for sleep. “We still have to wait though.”

“We’ll wait all that’s needed, amore.” He placed a kiss on his head and decided on settling himself with Ludwig’s comforting weight.

“Hm, I love you,” Ludwig said lastly.

“I love you too.” Feliciano wrapped his own arms around him, the last tightening grip of their consciousness before sleep took them.

They arrived back to the castle an early afternoon, to a big group of dignitaries waiting for them at their landing area. There was no impression to how majestically the winged lion presented itself, they immediately went to the royals upon the moment their feet touched ground.

“Your highnesses, letters from the other royals have arrived about acceptance to the coming reunion.”

“We must prepare all the necessary.”

“We need decisions concerning the ball.”

“We’ve also received replies from the many others you invited.”

“Your fencing practice! You must immediately begin!”

“You have to start with the dark bits release!”

Ah yes, they were back to the calling of their royal duties.

Servants took care of their small bags, the group dragging them, Ludwig and Feliciano giving all kinds of commands in different directions. Some of these things the King and Queen were supposed to be doing, yet everyone headed to them obediently, sure and knowing that whatever their choosing will be the best.

It was moments like these that reminded the arising royals of the power and command running through their veins, using it to officiate as they should.

Ludwig and Feliciano really wanted to remain together, chose as the couple the kingdom expected, but there were still different things they had to do, and so the group began to divide in two, one taking the arising king, the other the arising queen. They gazed to one another in the distance that grew between them, already a miss, already wanting a grasp of another again. But they did have to work, they did have to do these things, and so with disappointed sighs, they turned to their papers and words, back to their usual ruling.

There were still times for them, for cooking, baking, trying new clothes from the designers, spending time with Ausgustino, their readings together in the balcony of their room, strolls around the city, and even sparring between one another to practice their powers along with their growing armies who wanted a part of the surely coming war. It was an eventful month indeed and each day Ludwig was convinced more than ever over what he should do. His love for Feliciano solidified and strengthened, his power grew, he was taking more responsibilities and was feeling surer of his reign along with Feliciano.

With only but three days left to receive their visitors and for the ball, Ludwig went up the palace in sureness, a determination that made the servants bow and respect like that of all an astute king. He shone well in a red and white coat tail, gold and rich vest at his front, shinning with many intricate details, powerful boots, a pristine and handsome image even if he had just come out from dealing with the warrior dogs.

He arrived to the king's study, his presence loud even if his steps were slow and professional as ever, going up some of the stack of spiral stairs, passing shelves and ancient items, until he reached a singular safe at the very end of the room. Its birth was of a childish one, Ludwig had simply used it to hide his chocolate and other sweets from Gilbert or his cousins as a child, and as he grew older, it began to hold more items of importance, such as his sword, Romulus's letter, even diamonds, rubies and gold for emergencies. Then, there was the last gift, the one that after the letter, he thought he would never give it use, that it would never see release from the safe as it did now, well in Ludwig's hold, inspecting that it was still strong, clean, beautiful, ready. Knowing that…knowing what it meant, what it was about to bring, its weigh so heavy that it made Ludwig nervous, fretful, catching his breath as if it had taken all his energy. The air around him and even himself were weak, Aldrich's sudden presence, gentle, soothing, still startling him.

"What's the matter?" He questioned. Ludwig wasn't here often and so he came nearer wanting to see what could have brought him. His eyes slightly widened once he noticed the shinning single item on his palm, startled himself surely over the decision that it meant.

“Do you know what it means?”

“Yes, Opa, I know.”

Aldrich came closer, a well securing stand beside him. “Do you think this time we’ll hear a more positive reply?” He tested.

Ludwig sighed, “I don’t know, but I’m…still going to try.”

Aldrich hummed, slightly nervous himself. “And…will you be ready for what would come afterwards?” Aldrich really wanted Ludwig to understand. What would come next was a big change and decision, a taking that was to well change the kingdom.

“Isn’t that what me, Feliciano and Kiku have been preparing ourselves for? Besides, with the coming war…it’s best if we’re the ones to truly face it,” he smiled confidently, no delays, no fear, as sure about everything as the wind of the kingdom that blew outside proudly.

Aldrich couldn’t believe he had doubted, that he had momentarily forgotten, especially with how well Ludwig proved himself from the moment his arising began despite the turmoil with his arising queen.

Yes, it was time for a new sun to rise and reign.

“You have been ready for a while…you can begin,” Aldrich smiled, Ludwig thinking it perhaps the shiniest one he had seen on his wrinkled face for a while.

Ludwig had never been surer about this.

Chapter End Notes

I am really excited to write the next chapter.

Chapter 61

Chapter Notes

> Posting this from Antonio's country…my last day here actually. I'm incredibly sorry for the time it took me to post, but things were hectic and it wasn't till the last moment that I dedicated some writing. I really enjoyed writing this chapter and I hope you enjoy reading it too!

Feliciano prepared himself for the ball in his room. Well, to be honest, he wasn't doing much that moment.

He sat in a comfortable chair, the sound but the music of his chest, the familiar melody that calmed Feliciano well even in the activity and haste of a ball being initiated in the floors below him. His wear for the night was well prepared on his side of the bed, ironed, shinning, with flowers of surely the most recent picking, yet Feliciano sat with only but a white blouse, humming to the song, moving his fingers as if he was leading the notes to spread all across the room, even out in the night, his balcony door open to let that freedom.

"Feliciano, have I told you how much I love your hair," Kandake told him, helping the arising queen with fitting his hair for the ball. Not much was to be done, the only difficulty was adding the glitter and placing the golden vine circlet crown just the right place between his princely curls.

"You flatter me too much," he giggled. "Have you finished?"

"And…done!" Kandake just wanted to adjust a single golden leaf from the crown out of place.

"Great! Now let me do your hair!" Feliciano excited, taking an instant jump to start.

"Feliciano, I don't think you're familiar with my kind of hair!"

"I can still try! Just let me know if it's hurting or I'm doing something that can damage it." He pushed her towards a mirror, so she could keep a constant check.

"Now…hmmm," he began to think about what exactly he was going to do.

"Feliciano, you really need to prepare yourself for the ball. In fact, I should be the one dealing with you right now."

"Don't worry! We have enough time!" Feliciano took a white ribbon from a desk, keeping it around his neck as he began to take Kandake's hair to prepare into the form he wanted.

“You will surely get scolded by Ludwig,” she reminded.

“Pfftt, he won’t,” Feliciano rolled his eyes and determined in the fixing.

He remembered how in his first ball at the castle, that phrase would have him panicking, obedient, because he was so terrified to deal with Ludwig. How beautifully things had changed, how the words now didn’t mean the threat from before, whatever anger Ludwig could come with surely one he could tame and cure with their kisses, words and embraces. He was looking forward to spending this ball with him.

“Shouldn’t he be here preparing himself,” she wondered as she hadn’t spotted him in the room since she entered.

Feliciano shrugged, “he told me that there were some things he wanted to discuss with his grandparents and would prepare elsewhere.” Feliciano wasn’t really thinking about it.

“Then, shouldn’t you be dealing with the guest if he’s not able to?”

“Kandake…let me finish your hair before anything.”

The ball was the shine, the gold, the red, the expected lavishness of the castle that had the guest awing as they made their way down the halls to the ballroom. Feliciano had decided on more peaches, diamonds, red flowers to flourish at every single sight. Most vases, statues and desks were moved, bringing in more space, for the mix of visitors that came from all kingdoms this time in preparation for the coming reunion of all the royals. More chandeliers were placed than usual to alight the drinks of apple and peach wine, the jewels in their guests, the laughter that started at the opening of the large doors, all kinds of conversations swarming, bringing to life and already making this one of the many balls to remember.

Of all the Heartian royals, the first to greet the plentitudes was Ludwig Beilschmidt, descending in a wear of an opened white tail coat, embroidered elegantly in red, underneath it a rich red vest and tightened white shirt with a not too flamboyant cravat. It needed to add just a small touch. All to his suit, his pants, his boots, suited his figure excellently, having many who he passed by sway at how handsome he shone for the evening.

“And who must this be for?” Of all the annoying people he had to meet first.

Ludwig rolled his eyes but turned with the most respectful expression he could utter to welcome King Francis. “Hallo, Bonnefoy.”

“As emotionless as ever I see. Doesn’t fit how well you look,” he dared wink and Ludwig had to hold himself well from showing the roll of his eyes.

“Ludwig!” Lili greeted happily, jumping on Ludwig for an embrace that the taller had no problem giving.

Lili shone elegantly in such a simple yellow dress, with beautiful floral diamonds at the top, the same ones she had circulating around her hair as her crown. “It’s so nice to see you after

everything. How have you been? How is Feliciano? We've been hearing some amazing things from you two!"

"Lili, what did I tell you?" Vash scolded, coming along to join them as well in his own decorated suit.

"It's only Ludwig," she complained.

"Lili, I have to admit, it's not queenly acting," Francis scolded gently.

Lili pouted and Ludwig was about to exclaim joining to her side about doing as she pleased, but when spotting a blue and green from between the crowds of other guest, he got reminded. "Where are the others?"

"They've just arrived and are dealing with the traffic outside," Francis told.

Both the royal Spadians and Clubians arrived at the same instant, their doors swung at the same moment, all coming down to meet each other in an easy sight.

"Hey! Ivan! How you doing?" Alfred exclaimed unceremoniously, waving his whole body along like a child.

Ivan smiled and gave a gentle wave and smile, with it hiding the true groan he wanted to use. Elizabeta was the only one that shared a true excited greeting, while Arthur was embarrassed and tried to get Alfred to calm down.

"Where is Yao?" Ivan asked, trying to spot the Spadian jack.

"Oh, he's, uh-" Yao was signing at Alfred to shut up, wondering if there was a chance he could head out through the other exit without Ivan noticing. "He's…already in the ball!" Alfred came out with just in time, Arthur giving a sigh of relief.

"Ah, I must search for him instantly." Without more to spare, he made way into the feast, greeting and bowing to those he should.

It was then that Roderich dismounted, looking over to the Spadian royals with suspicion. "He's still in the coach, isn't he?"

Yao thought it safe to head out, waving in greeting to another fellow Jack.

"This is a royal reunion, Yao. At one point you'll both have to be in the same room," Roderich warned as he made his way forward into the castle alongside his queen.

Ludwig's movements through the halls and ballroom were slow, for every corner there was somebody calling for a chat, a greeting, a join into a drink or snack that he took to not disrespect…as well as to calm the nervousness he possessed.

“It’s nice to know your kingdom is welcoming to tribal fairies,” one such creature had told Ludwig.

“Our kingdom accepts all. I wish you luck in settling and that you continue to enjoy the feast,” he wished with a clink of their wine glasses.

“Thank you, your highness.” The group turned away and Ludwig was momentarily relieved to have freedom, until he felt someone staring him down from behind. He turned to meet with familiar jokers.

“Ludwig, it’s so great to see you again!” Dua was the first to shout and greet of the group.

All were dressed elegantly in yellow, with shines and details typical of their provinces in Diamonds. Ludwig gave them all smiles, chatting instantly on how they had been since their last meeting. He took all by turn, until finally-

“I’ve heard about how your relationship has improved.” This time, he didn’t feel that jealous flare from the last time he had met with Haris, sharing a smile and a civilized hand shake.

“It has. I’m truly glad you’re here for the night.”

“We couldn’t waste a chance of being invited by the very arising royals to the Heartian castle,” Gupta added.

“Feliciano will be ecstatic to see you all. He’s pretty late, but sooner or later he will appear,” Ludwig let them know.

“Ah, no wonder we can’t find him anywhere!” A familiar voice added, Ludwig now turning to meet the ones who had helped Feliciano and him with a good part of their traverse in Spades, as well as their companions when saving the capital city from the invading men of Khaos.

“Hello, Mei,” Ludwig turned to greet the new group, in their own flourishing blues, bowing, all except Mei and Lei, who were mostly searching for Feliciano still.

Both these groups joined to chat and speak, at one point Ludwig leaving them in his own search for Feliciano. He went back into the halls hoping to have a better meeting of him, instead, he saw two figures he could just not ignore as they passed by each other.

“You made it,” Ludwig greeted them, giving his hand to shake.

Despite how normal he tried to keep this greet, Neeraja and Priya still bowed, shinning like the very diamonds and chandeliers with blues and silvers.

“And we thank you deeply!”

“It is an honor to be here,” Priya smiled grandly.

“This will be you home for the next few days.”

“Actually…it will be for more.”

“What do you mean?”

Neeraja and Priya glanced to each other with knowing smirks.

“Have you forgotten a detail about us?”

And that’s when Ludwig remembered, “oh, yes, fortune tellers.”

“We only recommend you prepare the castle for a much longer stay than planned for your guest.”

They were about to turn and leave to other matters, but Ludwig just had to ask. “You knew all this…you knew what would happen after I entered the field.”

They turned to him once again, wondering what he meant and what he wanted to get to.

“And…you know what will continue to happen, about the alignment…the war. Is there… anything you can tell us to prepare.”

Neeraja and Priya shared glances of concern, silently speaking about what they could say, but it was quickly decided.

“No. We’re sorry, Ludwig, but we do not like to release a future that is best you keep uncertain about,” Neeraja uttered.

“We can only give you the same words of advice from before. Train, practice, learn everything you can of your power and hope that it can be the best,” Priya continued.

They bowed once again and this time surely left elsewhere, Ludwig giving them a simple wave, off then to continue on his waiting for Feliciano.

“Ah, his highness, Feliciano Valenti!” And there was the calling from one of the guards, in prepare for his entrance to the ball.

Ludwig turned, awaiting a descend from the stairs in the area. He was so sure, ready, strong enough to deal with what he will ask him later, but gazing now at his utter perfection wear and shine, it all extinguished and his mind was left in rubbish. He wasn’t alone in this, as all turned and were swayed at the Hearts's arising queen.

Of course, he was the subject of all this attention. He had been the main talk all this time after Augusta’s reveal, along with him being an Ace and destined to save them all. It was as if they were already staring at a god in the heavens, some already bowing, others left breathless and many just stared and admired his well proclaimed beauty.

Everything on his suit was well crafted in flowers and jewels, placed in just an elegant fashion that grew well all around him. It was tight, showing a figure that surely had many drooling, yet it was soft and comfortable, shown in the ease and smile Feliciano came down in. A silky cape followed him, long, but not reaching the floor or covering the grace he held,

it flew about with him. Then there was glitter, beautiful on his hair along with the laurel crown, as well as a simple touch around his eyes.

A true star, a true shine, sucking whatever movement Ludwig could have given, left only with impression and wonder. Feliciano managed to spot him between the heavy crowd, giving him an adoring smile, eager to be near him that instant.

And after nervousness, there was pride.

No matter the people there, who swooned and could only dream of having an arising royal of that magnitude, Ludwig didn't have to worry. As he walked his way between the people, he knew there was no other Feliciano thought about, no other he was expecting, no other to hold him, to kiss him to all's impression and make clear who was the couple that would bring strength to a coming war. It made him stand taller than the usual, for all to instantly give pass without question, for they knew that the king was coming to greet his queen.

Feliciano was close to reaching the crowds, but Ludwig reached the bottom of those stairs first, offering a hand for him to take and Feliciano practically dashed forward to it. They spun and laughed, much to the awe and impression from those who knew how rocky their relationship had been before.

"You look, well…gorgeous, beautiful…I-I…what else can I say?" Ludwig laughed.

Feliciano chuckled, "you already have me flattered. And you, look so handsome and wonderful and all mine and all I want to do is kiss you."

"Who am I to stop that?"

"Good." And Feliciano threw his arms around him with a greeting kiss that had the surprise even wider across the crowds. They indulged in their lips for what they wanted, a dispatch to an applaud greet of the crowds, and both waving their own back.

As it died down, as all found other attention, Ludwig and Feliciano, with their arms well wrapped, decided on joining the feast and enjoying from what would be offered. It wasn't long until they received shouts and the wanting of others to be close to them.

"Feli!" It was a very loud familiar shout from a Dane, coming along with his own familiar group.

"Oh gods! It's so great to see all of you again!" Feliciano quickly went to wrap his own arms around each of them, strong embraces with sways and even accepted kisses on the cheek by the arising queen.

"You have to tell me all that has happened after you left us in the diamond kingdom," Feliciano was eager to know.

"You're the one with a lot to tell us," Lukas said.

"What has happened even reached us," Berwald added.

“You’re quite famed now,” Tino said.

Feliciano blushed, “yeah, it’s…a lot to take in. But, Emil! How did it go with the ingression to the Luna Rani Academy?”

Emil heavily smiled, an excitement that grew that had Feliciano taking both his hands in a dear hold.

“I got accepted! I’m starting in a month!” And Emil joined Feliciano along in shouts and jumps as if it was the first time he got the acceptance letter.

“I’m so glad and happy for you! Oh, you’ll make an amazing student! You’ll make lots of new friends and study all kinds of things! You have to write and let me know how it all goes!”

“I’ll be glad to!”

“Feli!” And then there was the Amazon group, Martin practically tumbling Feliciano down to the ground.

“Martin, please, don’t kill him,” Elisa commented as she tried to hold the rest from crushing the poor arising queen.

The rest were loud blabbers that it was a miracle Ludwig and Feliciano could understand. More groups joined and greeted, as those of the Oralee, of the Asian provinces, the Diamond kingdom joker group and the other royals, with conversations, anecdotes, meetings and stories that could have lasted long into the night. Not to mention that they all wanted to be introduced to Augustino, all new gushes that Lovino had learned lately to just stand.

To be honest, Ludwig and Feliciano did not expect to be so heavily ambushed by so many people. Not that they minded, but they still needed an occasional breath.

Time flew, the night was coming into deeper darkness and it was quite awakening when the King, Queen and Jack took the tallest standing for the usual welcome and speech, with the reasonings of the ball, mentioning the successful track of the journey, Augusta, the fear of the coming war and finally: “-but let us now calm whatever agitations with a dance. As per tradition, let us let our arising royals begin our lead with a song of their choosing. Ludwig, Feliciano.” Queen Louis opened her arms to the welcome of the open floor left for them, the orchestra ready and anxiously waiting.

What a change that this time, Ludwig and Feliciano didn’t have to question it. Their acceptance was giving in a simple glance along with a smirk, already deciding the song. They walked together arm and arm, by the orchestra, giving a bow as a thank you to their music. As Feliciano pointed to his laurel crown with a wink, it was obvious what song was meant to be played. The composer turned to his musicians and instantly began the familiar song known well to be that of the King and Queen of Hearts.

No complains, no hatred, no disappointment, the arising royals happily took their way to the center, wishing this dance, wishing this moment for themselves if even the many eyes.

Feliciano turned to Ludwig, both taking the usual ready position, making sure to be comfortable, that they were set right, assured with a smile and the blushing color even in their eyes.

The sway that began was slow, simple, leaning them into the acceptance of the very song. This time, there were real smile in their faces, a glow that jumped all over the large ballroom, a spread that was helped as Ludwig and Feliciano took bigger spaces as they moved, taking quite a design on the floor for themselves. Spins, different kinds of grasps, of extends, graceful movement in every possible way that had everyone in true wonder and impression, lost in this magic, in a truth of love shown, even as the star dancers were ignorant to all those present. When the song took its known height, the arising royals matched with its quickness, jumping and daring to try new moves that were the perfect synchronization even when it was the first time. They laughed, they enjoyed, they focused on what they could create, of how they could test their trust with the sudden new movements. Unlike the last dance they shared in a ball, they were having fun, they felt freed, they shone with beauty and even as the song came to its conclusion, they waited on that last hold for more. As all around them clapped, and as they breathed, they could only stare into their eyes, wording whatever plot for the next song.

In this new one, others began to join along, and so Ludwig and Feliciano joined in dancing around them, smiling and greeting whenever they met with other couples they knew, like Herakles and Kiku, and Alfred and Arthur. They shouted, they matched, they sang and Ludwig had never thought that he would actually want to continue along with this feast no matter the song, the people that surrounded them or even if he was getting tired.

It was around the sixth song that he realized he was running out of breath, that neither his legs or arms could take anymore, yet he laughed and smiled, happy then to just hold Feliciano with him in an ending calming sway.

Yes, he wanted him, more than anyone, anything and he knew that no time was better to solidify that union. Whatever nervousness, he tried to keep it well inside him with his breaths, his hands on Feliciano's waist, distracted in the scent of his hair…he was wearing the perfume he gave him. They were well calmed, part of the many couples swaying in soothing motions, the light dimmed as if to give them all that moving nap. No one noticed as Ludwig signaled Feliciano to follow him elsewhere, and the arising queen, in his daze, easily followed behind him through all the lessening activity of the ball. They reached one of the large glass and colored doors, through which they could see the towering formed bushes and trees of the garden, entering into their lost, their colors, and the few lights that were lighted for the occasion, for those who wanted a stroll of the aromatic area or just wanted privacy away from all the bustling crowds of the feast. They hadn't drunken any alcohol, and yet Ludwig and Feliciano giggled, danced and even played about the paths as if they had gone through their heavy effects. Everything looked spectacular in the night, it was a surprise it was so lonely. Why didn't anybody else dare to enjoy from this green? These stoned pathways, particular fauna, fountain, hedges, arches, all made in a singularity of red and beauty that was definitely worth the visit, especially if you came from another kingdom. To Ludwig, it was better. All this extended space and wonder for themselves, made it more unique, serene, the seclusion for what Ludwig planned.

They reached what was either a middle or end, both of them tired, taking a sitting in a shaped white marbled bench, in an enclosure of roses and a tall tree that draped with its branches, leaves and vines, keeping them closed from any kind of reach of the party. They breathed heavily, finding calm after their thread across the garden, Ludwig especially readying for what was to come. They enjoyed from the silence, from the only rustling being the occasional breeze and their continuing breaths.

“This was a nice break,” Feliciano admitted with an appreciated smile, stretching and settling much closer to Ludwig’s side, thighs touching.

“There were more people than usual in this ball.”

“We did invite a lot,” Feliciano reminded.

“We did, but it’s nice seeing them again, make ourselves really sure that they’re doing fine,” Ludwig smiled with such a kindness that Feliciano ogled with a clear stare.

“What?” Ludwig wondered for it.

Feliciano sighed dreamily, “you look more handsome than usual when you admit you care.”

Ludwig chuckled, “I’ve always done, Feliciano.”

“You were too busy hiding it though.”

“I was, but…things have changed, haven’t they?” Ludwig reached his hand and took Feliciano’s grasp gently.

“They have and I’ve made very sure that I’ve loved every single moment of it since you opened.” Feliciano looked up and shared his other hand with his, exchanging those grasps in a loving strength.

“Yet I don’t think I’ll ever stop apologizing for how I treated you either,” Ludwig reminded.

“It’s not necessary. It’s in the past and we’ve learned to move forward and can look ahead in earnest.”

“Even with a war?”

“I’m sure we’ll beat Khaos,” Feliciano was determined as he brought Ludwig’s hand to kiss in promise.

Silence then settled, but neither minded it, their eyes could speak enough. Feliciano distracted though, in a new breeze that brought along and intensified the perfumed aroma of roses. He turned to follow it and Ludwig to determine himself in asking. His hands shook and Feliciano turned back to him instantly in worry.

“I love you,” Ludwig pushed himself to say before anything, raising a hand to take Feliciano’s face, fingers tracing well the softness, the glitter, even the warmth that he felt

grow beneath his fingertips. “I want to be with you always…I want us to be together for this war.”

“And we will be,” Feliciano assured as he raised his own hand to join his.

“I was us to be together in a different way than this.”

Feliciano’s eyes widened in a moment of worry, the worst coming to his mind first. It only worsened when Ludwig stood, but calmed once he saw him kneel before him, close, taking a powerful and somehow prideful stance between his legs. He lay like this simple for a while, Feliciano now seeing clear the nervousness in his eyes.

“Ludwig…are you okay? You seem really-” Feliciano was suddenly startled by a ring directly faced towards him. He was left without a word at the wonderful shine of red of the jewel, marbled well in gold, like a rose heart tempting to grow and embrace him in its shine. It was utterly beautiful, one that could blind, shut and leave Feliciano in an utterly frozen state. It was a wonder he could stare at it properly when Ludwig was shaking, constantly gulping, sweat temping to drop from his brow.

“I-It…was supposed to be your eighteenth birthday present, but after everything…well, I hid and tried to forget about it.” The gulp he gave then, along with his inhales, were deeply heard. “I…I...made it myself…took me weeks to be able to craft it with my magic how I wanted. I still think I need to retouch it… but maybe once a year I can add something or fix it how you wish,” he eased, distracting. He had to shake his head once again to bring him back to the track he wanted to take. “I…I know I don’t deserve you, I know I acted like a total fool before and know that I don’t deserve to even be asking you this question again. But I assure you that this time…I’m not asking because it’s duty, because it’s an engagement our families decided on or because it’s what the Aces, and the kingdom, and the rest of the world wants. This…this is not a recitation from an old tradition book, it’s not because of what’s coming or either because of the prosperity that will fall on our kingdom.” He took a moment to breathe, to gatherhis new words, while Feliciano remained as still, as patient and waiting for him to continue. “I’m asking because I want to be with you as this. I truly want us to rule together, to strengthen it with a love that I always want to devote true and powerful to you. I’ll journey far for you, no fear to loose, I’ll take down every opponent. There will be no heat or freeze to go against me. No sun, no rain…” It was then that he noticed what exactly he was saying, Feliciano giggling, but not minding. He only leaned closer to hear him clearer. “I love you and I want to be your husband, your king. So please, will you marry me? Will you accept to be mine…my queen?”

He looked so vulnerable, every weakness and opening in all his beautiful self that showed more strength than any soldier in a battlefield. Feliciano grinned and gave the gentlest laugh, the closest that he could show to the true flourishing that was occurring at this question that was now the loveliest shine to have happened. He leaned close, placing a gentle kiss of calmness on his head.

“I don’t want any of the riches you will bring,
I don’t care for any of the songs,
I only want you to hold,
I only want your arms around me,”

He began to sing sweetly, jokingly composing with a finger across their simple air. It died suddenly for both to laugh in the hold of their arms.

“Would you want all the gold I will find for you?
Would you like the songs I will bring from afar for you?
Would you accept me as your shield?
And would you want me always by your side?”

Ludwig managed to sing between, getting the lock of their eyes.

“I don’t want any of the riches you will bring,
I don’t care for any of the songs,
I only want you to hold,
I only want your arms around me,”

Feliciano answered, beginning a sway how they could in this position.

“Bring me your love, your kisses, your loyalty,
Your passion, your hope, your defeat,
Your promise, your weakness, your strength,
I will keep it all in my heart.

I’ll journey and see beyond the lines of our kingdom,
Never a fear to be lost, never a fear to fall,
In pleasure…”

Ludwig stopped singing, worried that the song was a distraction for him not to worry for when Feliciano denied him yet again. There was such a look of failure in his eyes and in it Feliciano saw that he now had to give his sure answer, one that in it lay a weight that the whole kingdom rested on.

“…I will take the mysteries of what I could meet…” Feliciano continued to sing in that low whisper, as the last time thinking, wondering…

“If you accept to be mine…” he stopped his swaying to lay still, with his upper body reaching his arms to rest on Ludwig’s shoulders “…my King.”

To be honest, the kingdom, the aces, his duties and responsibilities were the last on his mind when he looked into Ludwig’s adored blue eyes, still so terrified yet so naked in truth. All in his mind was love, his utter devotion to him, the feelings he instigated and how united, they could create so much more than what they knew on a surface. Happiness, he knew that there in his arms was his happiness, his shield, his sun, his heart. He didn’t think what it would mean to others but to himself, what this man would be to him, the trust and loyalty he would lay and he knew would prove faithful and brave. He thought about his true answer, well decided by the moment the ring was presented, before him now his true friend, his true king, his true Ludwig.

This time, in earnest, in joy and excited with all the expectations that were to come, he answered him:

“Yes.”

Chapter 62

Chapter Notes

> Oh, god, FINALLY!!! I'm so sorry it took SO LONG to post this! I variety of issues that made it impossible to write sometimes. GREETINGS FROM ALFRED'S DICK! (… Florida) Thank you for your patience and I hope this chapter was worth the wait. It's not the longest chapter in the story but it's in the top 5 longest. Please continue to be pateint please! Sure I might take centuries to post, but always expect an update sooner or later. I hope you enjoy.

Much of the dancing had stopped, most just enjoying from a drink or a dessert after dinner. The atmosphere of the ball was now one of calm and leisure, everybody in their own kind of rest and enjoying from what was left. The guards would soon announce their time to exit or head to their rooms and bring the ball to a close. All were well but Renata Valenti, who could not calm as she searched frantically through every corner of the ballroom, in no group finding the familiarity of her son or the prince.

"Has anyone seen Feliciano?" She asked a group of Spadians she had noticed they spoke to earlier.

"Sorry, Mrs. Valenti, but we haven't seen him since the dance," Cheng told.

"Where could he be?" She fretted, leaving them to search on.

An opening from one of the garden doors caught her attention, at its foot, the couple she was looking for, gazing between themselves with a blissful adoration.

"There you two are!" Renata called, coming forward. "One of those nice fellows from the White kingdom is trying to show me a water removal spell and it's not working as we hoped. We wanted you to come, Feliciano, and-" something was off, something was different. Ludwig and Feliciano were blushing and smiling too much, a kept hold of their hands that was very obviously trying to hide something.

"What's wrong?" She caught on, her eyes giving a strong questioning glare.

It was the kind of scene that grasped the eyes of many that were near, giving side glances with their own curiosities.

A rather sudden silence fell in the room, as Ludwig and Feliciano shared teasing smiles and eyes, in it wondering how they could announce this.

Ludwig had a sudden idea, showing it to Feliciano with a rub against that finger and the other understood, nodding in acceptance for it be done.

Ludwig presented Feliciano's hand, nothing of magnitude…until he moved aside his fingers and the ring shone in presence, glowing in such a way that it was like a loud firework in the room.

"Ma dosca! Non lo posso credere! Questo è vero? Questo è vero?" Renata shouted, many eyes landing on the scene, on the ring, the widened reaction spreading across the room.

Both Ludwig and Feliciano nodded, sure, yes…they were getting married.

"Aaahhh, mamma mia, si sposeranno! Si sposeranno!" She jumped and brought them both into her excited, strong and tightening embrace. It was a shout that the rest in the room shared in. Many jumped, danced, screamed on, word quickly spreading in the ballroom of what the arising royals had decided. The rest, like King Aldrich, Queen Louis, Gilbert, Monika, Reinhardt, Vincenzo, Lovino, Antonio, of course bringing ahead little Augustino, came like a stampede with their relief, embraces, congratulations, shouts and celebration.

It was rare to see their King smiling so largely, distracted in the birth of the news…until he had noticed the stares on him, surely admiring how well he shone like this. "Guards! Don't just stand there! Send the servants to light up the main tower! The whole city must know!" Aldrich commanded, startling many of the guards into a dizzy mess, crashing and even falling before they could actually leave the room to pass the command.

The city was in nightly calm, most enjoying from a stroll, getting the last groceries or items for the next day, romantic outings, or those in their normal commune returning home. The castle was shining with its ball, but it was the usual, nothing to really stand out about it despite its largeness. That was until there was working in the main tower, and suddenly one glow of red began at its top, then another followed below it, and then another, and another, until finally the very center shone with a special Hearts symbol, familiar to all, for they had all been taught to know what it meant.

Celebration was heard clear through every street, those who had been sleeping, awakened, to look out their windows and have the very castle announce the news. More shouts, everyone embracing, calling out to inform however possible, bringing new liveliness to this city night.

As Priya had said with her prediction, the castle prepared the visitors' stay for now a month long one. It not only had to do with the meeting where all the royals were present to prepare for a war at the end of the year, it was also because many wanted to stay for the Heartian coronation…as well as Ludwig and Feliciano's wedding.

The meeting passed with excellent results, plans that were intensified and better reinforced with their long stay to really map out and extend their plans to how they wanted. They practiced, they improved, they made sure to do all the possible to strengthen themselves against Khaos's new threat.

They eagerly counted the days to the coronation and wedding, set at the end of the month. Yes, only a single month to prepare for a ceremony so large, but everyone had been too eager to wait any longer. It was an inducing of preparational headaches for both Ludwig and Feliciano.

Renata had helped Feliciano get the box of fabrics, the one Ludwig had gifted him for a birthday, from one of the storage rooms and up to a reserved room that would be used to create Feliciano's ceremonial suite. At first, it was a mother-son job, but then Lovino and Antonio wanted to join, bringing along Augustino to crawl about the room, a much needed sweet distraction whenever there was too much stress. Then Lili, Elizabeta and Arthur wanted a part…and then Kandake, then even Ivan, Roderich, Mei, Rosangeliz, Elisa, Dua, Priya. As the day came closer, the room got heavier with activity, along with a bigger mess and bigger days of madness.

"Are you seriously all here?" Ludwig one day wanted to peek, only to have the door slammed on his face before he could even take a glimpse at the light.

"No arising Kings allowed!" He heard Arthur shout out.

Ludwig rolled his eyes and grunted before he moved away, but he just had to understand. It was traditional to not see each other in the ceremonial suit before the wedding and coronation. And to really stick to that tradition, Ludwig and Feliciano hadn't seen a peep of each other that week before, busied each with different things in countdown for that day.

Ludwig and Feliciano slept in their own respective study rooms, the soon retiring royals explaining every bit of information missing that they had waited to tell until these last days of their arising. A week, even if they were in the same castle, both dealing with their own wedding, they still felt a heavy miss for the other, dreading the nights without their arms, stressing without their calming sooths, not even a smile to make sure that everything will turn out fine.

That night before, stressing still over some last details to the ceremonial suite, Feliciano couldn't leave it alone. Renata had to come and pull him to her room, where Feliciano took his rest, comfortably in his parents' bed as if he was a child all over again. Neither didn't mind it, it was indeed reminiscent.

"Well, your highness, or soon to be, your majesty!" Elizabeta had barged into the room in the morning, still dressed in her nightgown, but excited and energetic for the special day.

Feliciano groaned and kept himself between the covers, between his parents. Renata and Vincenzo laughed, trying to shake their son awake.

"Come on! Wake up! Do you have any idea what day it is today?" Elizabeta came in along with Lili, both jumping on the bed to join along. Feliciano continued to groan out unintelligence, until the light of the day brought him to open his eyes and with it came the reminder, the alarm, making him sit up instantly on the bed.

“Oh gods, it’s my wedding day…it’s my coronation…I’m going to be Queen…I’m going to get married…” he shook, along with his voice, but there was an edge of excitement that kept him smiling, as well as the rest. He began to bounce and the rest joined him along in the jitter before they could actually stand on the floor.

“Oh gods, this is happening, it’s happening. I was supposed to be prepared for this, but now I just feel sick, oh god, what if I throw up in the ceremony, oh gods no, I think I’m going to die, oh gods, I’m going to die,” Feliciano dramatized, blowing his hands on his face and trying to breathe. He was ready to faint.

“Oh no, no, no, we’ll be having none of that,” Elizabeta had to hold him down.

“You’ll do fine, Feliciano,” Lili helped.

“I got this nervous for my own coronation, but you’ll see soon enough that it won’t be as difficult as you think and it will all run as naturally as the Aces intended,” Elizabeta advised, giving him that confidence in the hold of her hands. Feliciano breathed out and settled his posture straight, nodding in approval to her words.

“We have to hurry!” Renata reminded.

“We still have to add some last things to the suit!” Lili added.

“And we have to get you, as well as all of us dressed,” Vincenzo came along as well.

“Well, come on, come on, come on, let’s go, let’s go!” Elizabeta hurried them out the room before any other thought could distract them.

They ran across the hall in laughter and dances, seeming like they would run across the ceiling, fly the rest of the way and it all helped Feliciano to grow more courage to what he was soon to meet.

Thanks to Feliciano’s, and then even Ludwig’s, insisting, the gates of the castle were well opened to receive all who wanted to attend.

The entire city was brought to a halt, all kinds of shops, agencies, bakeries and restaurants closed, train lines only working for directions to the castle, all the guards, even the highest soldiers, to stay in the vicinity and watch well all this commotion of people that came. They all brought their joy, excitement, wishes, seeming to alight the very land with a new coming promise.

They were eager to watch as a new part of the kingdom began.

It was incredibly piled, and sadly, not all could come inside to the church where the ceremonies were to take place. Some had to settle with remaining outside, others in the halls or gardens, but Ludwig and Feliciano had given commands to keep them as attended and entertained, with messengers, dancers, drummers and guards posted to deliver whatever news of what was happening.

The church was reserved for the earliest who could arrive, as well as family, special invited friends, the rest of the royals and all who were and will be important to the reign of the kingdom.

The castle was decorated excessively in all kinds of reds and golds, with flowers and banners that seemed to flood every area, and the church was not saved from this.

As the guests awaited, servants kept adding, and it was something occurring in the rest of the halls of the castle. When the time to start was approaching, some of the organizers had to shoo them all to their place, taking in breaths, readying the commencing song and dancers, hard to remain still when in honesty they were all shaking. There were so many more people than anticipated, no spot left empty. Them, along with the excessive decorations, were all truly a wave of action, eyes and presence, distracting and making the organizers question how they could properly do anything with all this watching. Not to mention there were people outside as well, surely as attentive and alert.

No moment had been heavier than this. It was if all could feel the expectations and hope of the people well over the ceiling of the entire castle.

As the main organizer gazed to the clock at one of the center balconies, he knew he had to begin the ceremony. Here it finally was and it started at his sign. He only raised a single hand, one that the trumpeters in the church could notice well, beginning then the announcement, one that called for silence in the church. The trumpeters outside in turn heard and played their own to the rest of the people. Orchestras joined then, creating a beautiful melody for the entrance of dancers, well dressed in elegant dresses and suits of the kingdom, with fabrics swishing and flying to decorate. Others were outside, surrounding well the castle like a necklace creating their own dance as the ones inside the church did.

When a part of the song that was playing reached a certain height, it was time for the Jack to make his entrance. First came a group of banging drums at his welcome, joining with the melody of the orchestra, intensifying presence and decorating the steps they walked from the top of the room, down the stair, and into the main aisle.

The Jack was dressed in rich robes, in gold, reds and white that shone and made him the most powerful person that walked that moment. He came along with an imponent staff, truly reigning him, accompanying in his walk by children helpers, dressed in white, red and golden robes, the same, yet different Heartian symbols to represent different provinces of the kingdom. While the dancers continued to move to the sides, they found their positions in the alter, accommodating in perfect order, clearly letting the Jack the center position for now. Once they stood as they should, the composer lead all the orchestras and trumpeters to stop, silencing outside as well, letting it lay well in the room. The dancers all organized elegantly in a corner of the church, forgotten, out of importance. It was time for the Jack to speak. He gazed to all, still testing the silence, gaining breaths, high tone, even the bravery to speak to this immense crowd.

“My Clubians, my Spadians, my Diamonds, and especially, my Heartians. A momentous day this is, one that would be looked well upon in the future as we have recently discovered our true past, as well as to face a war that could be the magnitudes of what was once the Darkened Decades,” he began, his voice loud and bouncing well from every corner. The

room fell into quite a somber silence, rare with the amount of people inside. “Do not dare show whatever fear you hold, instead, prepare, grow strength, show in whatever you can that Khaos will be defeated for sure and it will be something done by our hands!” He shouted, which earned claps and screams of approval across the crowds. “But now, let us show celebration, feast, and witness all ourselves as new men come into our ruling to lead us in the trying times to come. We will also see, the union of two of these royals, granting not only the prosperity and strength needed for our kingdom, but their peace and their show that after all, love conquers and brings together all that is meant to be.” There was a last round of applause.

As soon as it was over, chants immediately started, having begun by a group of priests that made their way down the stairs and aisle. Their voices rustled against the walls, bringing shivers to all those present, even those who were near enough the walls of the castle to hear if only but a whisper from the outside. They continued chanting even as they symmetrically made their way to the back of the alter, an area that helped intensify their voices, the art, the symbols and sculptures that towered high making it all more heavenly, welcoming them, silencing with a sign from the Jack, once again the church being laid in silence. He raised his hands and called out a Latin word, the ancient word that called for the new Jack, to announce his entrance, enunciated with the new chants of the men in the background, a lovely sound to his welcome.

New dancers came, drummers and flags exploded in with a song to follow, new children, different pillows holding different items, all important to the ritual that was to take place. After the showcase, they all turned to Kiku’s entrance, from the very top of the room, to take his steps down the stairs and all the way to the alter by himself.

His robes were long, in silk, shine, rubies, silvers and pearls in symbols of the kingdom, even those of his province. On his head there was a specialized black cap with beautiful imagery as well, along with the threading robes, looking quite heavy, yet Kiku made his way down with head held high not minding at all its weight. A large staff was in one hand, golden and red, at the top proud symbols of the Jack of Hearts. In his other hand he held a pillow where atop laid a specialized crown, simple, with pearls, pinks and reds that was like wind picking up a small handling of petals.

Elegant oriental beauty, different and well shinning in this mainland nest. Awes expanded, all silent as they gazed and examined well all the images in his robe, seeming to tell through flowers, animals and symbols the story of their kingdom, all leading to this day. The Jack smiled deeply at Kiku as he finally came to the main aisle, one that actually made the arising Jack falter, nervous in his steps.

He was finally in front of it, the place where he would be crowned in his position. The day was here and for a moment he was fearful. He raised those steps, finding comfort in the height of the alter, the priests, the Jack, even the images that surrounded. They all seemed to smile down at him in comfort, advising that all will be well and that there was nothing to fear. It was there that Kiku released the breath he was holding since he entered the room. As he was told, as the Jack had practiced with him, he took his place at the left side of the alter, turning to face the crowd, holding himself, along with the items and the long robe well.

A special chant had played and had to finish, one that the crowds could applaud to, both inside and outside. When silence was reached yet again, the Jack called out another word, a new chant started, and those who had been old enough to remember the last crowning knew that it was now time for the new King's entrance.

New dancers, new drums, flags, children holding ritualistic symbols in pillows made their way down, joining the others that had presented the arising jack, their melodies and dancers already coating the aisle in what would be his symbol of kingship.

Ludwig's ceremonial suit was all strength and power, in dark red colors, well suited to show his build, shinning in seals, in ribbons, with gold on his shoulder, on his long cape, craft beautifully sewn symbols all throughout. It was as heavy and long as Kiku's robes had been, but this one was exact, in fact, some knew that Ludwig was capable of holding more. The boots he wore were strong enough to make the ground shake, grasping all's full attention, some even fearful of his potency. Yet he was a beauty, and despite, no one could remove their eyes as he made his way down the steps and into the main aisle. In one hand, he held a staff similar to Kiku's, only images pertaining that of the king, in the other, the pillow with the King's crown. It was heavy, filled with all kinds of rubies and dark diamonds. In its center was the symbol of the kingdom, the most ancient one, which will soon stand on his head as he was to represent that very symbol as its King. Its arches and points were tall, surely the biggest of the three crows to represent the magnitude of the position.

At the bottom floor, King Aldrich was awaiting him, as elegantly and powerfully dressed. He held a warming smile, enough of a greet as they met, bowing before the other to then turn and walk down the aisle to the altar together. Both the Jacks could not hold their smiles, greeting them both with a bow as they reached the altar's bottom. Aldrich remained there, taking his spot to the side, while Ludwig rose to take his position at the center, as nervous as Kiku, both trying to send each other comfort, luck and even bravery through their gazes. They both remained still as the chant in the background continued.

It ended, the crowds applauding yet again and then silence welcomed the next part. The Jack took such a deep breath that he even kneeled, to come back up and direct himself towards Kiku. He neared, taking the necessary position, grabbing items from the pillows the children offered and placing them on Kiku as should be necessary.

"Are you ready?" He whispered only for him.

Kiku was breathing heavily and he was probably at the brink of tears, but he managed to nod, an unintelligible, "hai."

"Then here it comes," the Jack said before he moved back, preparing, his body, position, even his voice and movements. He extended his arms wide, looking up into the heavens, meaning to be loud and boisterous as for even the Aces to hear. He started in Latin words no one could understand, and despite it, Kiku could feels its pangs, its reaching, fulfilling the turning already.

"I present to you all, Kiku Honda, from the province of Japan, arising Jack of Hearts. Take him and accept him as the new Heartian Jack, to serve and fulfill to his kingdom for the length necessary. He presents himself in all self and truth, ready for your new power that he

will use for protection, prosperity, growth and strengthening for the kingdom." He continued in Latin, finishing a chant, then taking a golden and rubied ancient Hearts symbol, placing it before Kiku's chest, which, to the amazement of all, began floating in midair.

This was a sign that the process was going as it should be.

Ludwig had to take a space aside, the Jack, the dancers, drummers and children, leaving an area just enough for Kiku. The Jack raised his voice, the priests began a new song and the drums joined. The floating symbol began to spin, moving slightly further, slowly beginning to emit sparks of red that then grew into a red glow. It took heights, reaching to a tall center of the frontal part of the church, for all to well watch. Soon the symbol began to grow, taking a new form, a more powerful and potent symbol that emitted a luminous red ribbon. With the many that came and how they expanded, all had feared that they would be succumbed into it. But no, it's reach was only for the arising Jack, wrapping around him, coating him then in continuous sparks and glows of red, until it disappeared and it only left Kiku's contour glowing, an opening of his eyes to reveal a red, as well as distinct markings across what was visible of his skin. It was a passing of new power that Kiku was busy being submerged in, letting it adjust, settle, even rest in this body, accept it as his new home.

A symbol of finishing was when Kiku would breathe, his first one in his new position, one that was freed in magic, making the marks disappear in stars, in red, beautiful, lighting up at the staff, announcing more strongly what Kiku is now.

He turned, two of the children coming forward to hold his pillow and staff, while Kiku, shyly, with a bit of shake, had to take his crown and place it upon himself.

All awaited, for now it was Kiku that was to speak, that was to take command of the rest of the ceremony. He was nervous, the silence elongated as he found his words and his bravery again.

He faced the crowds, now powerful and reigning, announcing, "the Aces have accepted me. I am now the kingdom's Jack."

Applauses, jumps, shouts, probably the loudest by Herakles and his parents in the crowds. It was then shown in the outside, one that could ring well against the castle inside. Kiku smiled and warmed at their affection, bowing and waving to all those he could. But he couldn't remain in this for long, he had to continue the ceremony.

When all was once again in silence, one expecting, in anxiousness, the crowds looking above to the entrance, waiting for the missing member, did Kiku raise his arms, bringing upon him the power needed for the calling, the very magic that had to be in the word he would call out.

"Regina," it echoed, like wind to reach across the castle, even outside, to all to still and bow before the entrance of the new coming queen.

The dancers that came in held the most beautiful dresses, their dances the lengthiest, but the most serene, moving, like the song of a lullaby. New Queen flags came, the drummers here much simpler, joining along with bells, as well as the children that carried the necessary, not just for the crowning, but also for the wedding.

Feliciano had come in late by mere seconds, for he stood in his hiding, shaking, lost, a near guard having to whistle to get him to move, to come forward and show himself before the multitudes.

He was splendor by the moment his white boots were seen, a beauty to grow as more of the ceremonial suit was shown. It was something quite simple, the things that adorned not too full, just the right amount to bring out the amazing colors, the fabrics, the seals, ribbons, even the large St. Mark symbol on his front. Flowers decorated simply across him, ones that were freshly picked from the castle gardens, enhanced with some slight magic to keep them lively for the ceremony. The colors, the very long cape that kept extending a large space behind him, even the long clear sash across his front, were as soothing as a rose petal's, some embroidered in true gold, in significant designs that seemed as active and as alive as the flowers. He was like a castle garden in movement, slow, all the eyes on him heavy, making him fearful, surely missing the supposed steps he was to take as he practiced with the queen. Even with a large St. Mark walking by his side, Pookie the true elegance he wished he could show, he was afraid, tremulous, fearing that the staff and his pillow with his crown would fall off and break apart below. He was paralyzed awaiting by the top floor, but no one noticed that show of nervousness, they were still too hypnotized by his shine and no other showed it more strongly than the arising King.

Ludwig was left just as frozen, taken by Feliciano's full beauty…wearing the fabrics he gifted himself, recognizing, adorning him well to join him in kingship, that was to be his beloved, his new family, to be tied to him in such a way spiritually that would truly make them one. His widened expression was seen to all, yet none of them were present in his mind, that erased them all in favor of making Feliciano shine the more.

The silence that came that moment was starting to become awkward, Kiku noticing that Feliciano's entrance was being too slow and that they had to hurry. He had to hit Ludwig awake from his stupefaction, to get him to do something that could get Feliciano moving forward.

Ah, right, yes, they were in their coronation and wedding. Now Ludwig noticed how nervous Feliciano stood, to the point that he couldn't even bring movement to any part of his being, surely all kinds of dark thoughts clouding his mind to nothing. Ludwig quickly tried to connect their gazes, far, but he knew it could omit and bring action. He signed, with hands movements that were familiar to them since childhood. He told him to not be worried, afraid, that all who were there were people that cared for him and wanted to see him be crowned in this position. If all these eyes and heavy attention was too much, he told him to keep focused on each other, on their eyes, on their reach after a week of heavy planning that involved being away from one another.

'Come to me, be with me, accept to be mine, finally, my queen' were the signs that brought Feliciano back into light, to shine with magic and colors, bringing the sun into the room as he always did. He truly raised, standing as queenly as he will be, matching along with Pookie finally, the now large St. Mark nodding at him to let him know that they could move on.

The orchestra began a song when Feliciano got his steps once again, of beauty, of majesty, the arising Queen thanking with a bow to both this music and to all the people present. They

all managed to bow in return, thankful that he had enough in his entrance to address to them.

He went down the steps in elegance to meet an equally prestige Queen, holding herself from smiling any larger, bowing once they reached equal levels, Feliciano returning it, with his own big smile that wanted to explode in more along with her. Pookie moved between them as they walked down the aisle, ever closer to the alter, to a Ludwig who was ready to burst in a heightened feeling.

Pookie raised his wings high, decorating Louise and Feliciano in more splendor, shinning in their reach to the alter. Queen Louise took her position by King Aldrich, taking his arm, below, while Feliciano raised, some of the children having to come help move forward and accommodate his long cape how they could in the alter. Finally, he was before Ludwig, both smiling in welcome, with warmth in their eyes and with want to kiss and love, especially when both presented themselves as handsomely as they did.

As the last notes of the song played, four children came to pick their staff and the pillows with their crown, each close, in practice positions as part of the ritual. Once Ludwig and Feliciano's hands were free, they instantly turned and brought their hands to the other, an adoring grasp that brought them lost to themselves, for a moment forgetting they were in such an important ceremony. Ludwig kept rubbing confidence in Feliciano's hands, their eyes dazed, the only words being Ludwig's whispered: "like a true Ace."

How they wanted to kiss, they even neared hoping for that chance, but Kiku's glare between brought them back to their place, to patience, to commit to how they stand while they were finally wedded.

Kiku took a deep breath, this new magic that he had only trained and heard by the now past Jack to be uttered. With red magic in his eyes and hands, he clapped harshly, a loud boom that even spread gold across the crowds inside and outside. They all witnessed as a certain ribbon that circled the room shone in red and gold much livelier, omitting an enchantment. What? They did not know, but knew it was one to aid in the union of the couple at the altar.

"My Clubians, My Spadians, My Diamonds, and My Heartians," Kiku began, a resounding voice that made all hear well, fall attentive to and witness. They all stood, even those outside, as respect, as a part of the ritual they were all also part of. "Today we all come together along with the Aces who watch above us, to presence the unity of these two arising royals, to not only strengthen and seal their love, but also to present a kingdom powerful and ready for whatever adversities."

Kiku presented a hand to Ludwig, with a flower that sparked in a small burst of gold and red towards him. "Arising King and Prince Ludwig Beilschmidt of the German Province." His other hand he presented to Feliciano, with a flower of his own that burst as expected. "Arising Queen Feliciano Valenti of the Italian Province." He brought his hand down to unite in a comfortable and warming hold. "Both Heartians, raised well under its domain, its riches, its nature, its food, water, shades, who know it as well as they do themselves. In their loyal and exclusive faithfulness to each other, they assume the responsibility to withhold their relationship as well as to take control of their kingdom. In the presence of myself, our people and the very Aces that surely watch, Ludwig, Feliciano, state your intentions to each other as

well as to the kingdom." Kiku gave them the space and silence needed for both to take their chances.

Ludwig, with a nod, an intake and a gathering to what he wanted to say, decided on beginning. "I, Ludwig Beilschmidt, am here to marry Feliciano Valenti, freely and by my will."

"I, Feliciano Valenti, am here to marry Ludwig Beilschmidt, freely and by my will," Feliciano said in his turn.

"Are you both prepared to follow this new path, to love and honor, to bring forth heirs to bring up as you both have been done in the kingdom, for all your time in our living world?"

"Yes," they both answered in perfect unison, honest and true.

"The rings," Kiku called forward, two children coming with the very items in the hold of their pillows, presented as to be used by the new Jack. "As it is of your intention, take these rings and place them now as you declare before us all and the Aces."

Feliciano dared and reached to begin this time, slightly trembling, breathing heavily, fearing that he would let Ludwig's beautiful golden vined with rubied stones ring fall in a horrible clamor to the floor. He managed to take Ludwig's hand readily, to aim the ring in the determined finger.

"Ludwig, I take you to be my husband, my king, to have and to hold, from this day on, for glory, even for defeat, no matter riches or peasantry, only till the Aces call me to the heavens upon my death." The ring was placed, well along with another connection to their soon new union.

Ludwig then took Feliciano's ring, the very one he proposed him with, as beautiful, new leaves and encrusted designs made with magic to shine in more majesty for the day it would start to signify their marriage. "Feliciano, I take you to be my husband, my Queen, to have and to hold, from this day on, for glory, even for defeat, no matter riches or peasantry, only till the Aces call me to the heavens upon my death," Ludwig said as the ring was placed, invigorating Feliciano with a large smile, having to breathe to deflate and continue to show the seriousness this was meant to be.

They extended apart, while still holding dearly to their hands, now both well with their rings. Kiku was to continue to speak. "Let the Aces strengthen what you have both consented to, so before this powerful alter. May they help fulfill your wishes as well as give ever lasting blessing."

Two children then came along, two golden and rubied medallion symbols. Kiku picked them both up, placing one before Ludwig, the other before Feliciano, both items held in midair as Kiku continued to speak, "the Aces now bind you in a connective force that nothing can break, nothing can defeat. Ace of Clubs, Artem, let him bless you." The symbols began to glow, starting in green. "Ace of Spades, Maiara, let her bless you." It glowed in blue. "Ace of Diamonds, Jabbar, let him bless you." Yellow. "And our dear Ace of Hearts…Augusta…" It was still so impressive, so unbelieving, a silence of understanding still continuing, Feliciano

feeling the strength of his great-grandmother more than ever now, as she surely worked to fulfill this union. "…let her bless you." The symbols began to glow in strong red, spinning and reaching high in the air, placed for all to watch in wonder. "The aces now bind you in a connective force that nothing can break, nothing can defeat," Kiku repeated, extending his hands for all to speak and join now.

"We, along with Aces, join in blessings and power," they all chanted, loud, coming from even outside the castle.

The orchestra began playing a beautiful melody, drums played, all to the glow and spin of the two symbol medallions high above the alter.

It then all stopped once the spinning ceased, the crowds joining in that halt, the only movements coming from Kiku as he continued presenting with his hands.

"Begin your chosen vow," he told the still arising royals.

All smiled, from the children at the altar, to the furthest watcher outside. The orchestra and even the drums prepared, knowing the song they will chose, that will be sung once again in this church, as all Kings and Queens had done. Like Romulus and Augusta, Ludwig and Feliciano had decided to be yet another that sang the lyrics into these walls, as they had dreamt and wanted for so long.

Ludwig took the silence to start, as potent as he could for all to hear, as a confession for the world to know.

"I'll journey and see beyond the lines of our kingdom,
Never a fear to be lost, never a fear to fall,
In pleasure, I will take the mysteries of what I could meet,
If you accept to be mine, my Queen."

Afterwards the orchestra started in a simple melody to join with him.

"No heat, no cold, will stop me of my search,
No sun, no rain to go against my strength,
Just promise me your hand,
And love me in our eternity."

It was then Feliciano's turn to sing, ready, loud, sweet and beautiful.

"My sun, my moon, my land, my love,
I know it's a journey you will overcome,
But I don't need you to go so far,
I want you here to kiss me."

The orchestra turned livelier, Ludwig and Feliciano holding a large temptation to dance.

"Would you want all the gold I will find for you?
Would you like the songs I will bring from afar for you?

Would you accept me as your shield?
And would you want me always by your side?”

And then drums started and played at Feliciano’s rhythm.

“I don’t want any of the riches you will bring,
I don’t care for any of the songs,
I only want you to hold,
I only want your arms around me.”

They weren’t the only ones holding that temptation to dance, the song just brought a feast that all the crowds wanted to join in.

“Bring me your love, your kisses, your loyalty,
Your passion, your hope, your defeat,
Your promise, your weakness, your strength,
I will keep it all in my heart.”

They couldn’t help the little jumps their bodies made, what little they could omit of their usual dance, getting ever closer, as if trying to get a privacy to their song.

“I’ll journey and see beyond the lines of our kingdom,
Never a fear to be lost, never a fear to fall,
In pleasure, I will take the mysteries of what I could meet,
If you accept to be mine, my King.”

The crowds applauded, and the medallions began spinning again in glows of red and gold.

“By the power in me as the Jack of Hearts,” Kiku raised a single hand, as a sort of decree of direction for where the blessing was supposed to head.

“I declare you…”

Everyone was excited, Ludwig and Feliciano’s smiles were well glowed as the magic that rung above them, growing into those familiar rays that were soon to make their reach. It was in that first touch, one that landed on Feliciano, that all for a moment became silent, frozen, greyed, the only colors being Ludwig and Feliciano, the only sound that of a harp playing, solitary, sad, working a magic of time stopping to get a message across to other two long lovers hidden well in this new couple.

“My sun, my moon, my land, my love…” Feliciano sang, to a stricken Ludwig.

“The sky has all fallen,
The kingdom weeps their king’s farewell,
And a queen breaks at her lover’s parting again,
All will join in your defend,”

Feliciano neared, placing his hands on the side of his face, Ludwig raising his own to caress at that touch, secretive in this transported moment.

As the magic became stronger, neither could hear the words that continued to be sung, only but one last, "…so the heavens will bless in your rest our perfect peace…"

The union magic had them well engulfed, a powerful pull to place them back in their ceremony, without the sudden new song and the reach of ancient beings.

It was forgotten.

"Husbands to serve their kingdom."

Ludwig and Feliciano instantly went for that kiss as the last rays rained on them, finalizing, a wave of stars and shine spreading all about the city from their point, where their lips continued to celebrate that shinning new union, refusing to depart to the wilder shouts, applauds, even tears of those who had been too excited.

That kiss felt monumental, large despite the touch of something so small and soft, but the official starting to now their marriage. They departed to see excesses of those stars landing on them, shinning their clothes more in even new designs that they both took to looking, impressed, showing to the other this addition surely made by the Aces themselves. They took time to smile to the crowds, but they couldn't help another kiss, coming back to celebrate, wrapping their arms strongly around one another as they let their own lips reign the altar. The crowds only continued to turn wilder, a good large moment to celebrate just the marriage… but now it was time for the coronation.

As an interrupting to get the crowds to silence…as well for the now married couple to stop kissing, trumpets sounded, a song more of majesty and ruling. The crowds had to contain themselves and Ludwig and Feliciano departed from their kiss and strong embrace, both turning now to the alter, yet still a hold of their hands, mostly for confidence.

Kiku stood before Ludwig, children with items joining. Everyone awaited and stood with incredible joy, one that was enough to bring more gold to the church, the ecstatic like strong wind even as the windows were closed. It grew more as Kiku began to place the necessary items on Ludwig, as he departed, making sure everything was placed as necessary.

"Ready?"

Ludwig took a deep breath, a confident nod and smile from his now husband and a powerful step forward, having to let go of Feliciano's hand to do this.

"Ja."

Kiku clapped his hands strongly, then opening his arms to begin a Latin chant, words that made Ludwig feel like he was boiling, but he kept well to continue to stand as strong.

"I present to you all, Ludwig Beilschmidt, from the province of Germany, arising King of Hearts. Take him and accept him as the new Heartian King, to serve and fulfill to his kingdom for the length necessary. He presents himself in all self and truth, ready for your new power that he will use for protection, prosperity, growth and strengthening for the

kingdom.” Kiku took an ancient symbol, placing it before Ludwig, the medallion successfully floating.

The chant continued, drums began, the music joining in the rise of this medallion, an imposing that made everyone’s heart beat the faster, Ludwig’s especially. It grew until it began releasing red ribbons, looking like their hold would be more constricting, taking instant grasp of Ludwig, succumbing him all in red, a harshness that almost burned as it well implanted itself in his being, taking skin, muscle, vein, until marks shone throughout, the opening of his eyes as a release from the pain, showing a red soft glow that made many wonder if he was blinded.

The chant, orchestra and drums stopped, the biggest of the shine now gone, leaving Ludwig in only the dim, a long deep red shinning that left him frozen, the rest of the crowds agitated, waiting for any kind of new action.

Movement was granted with a breath, a gentle release of that glow and power, having to confide on exercises he knew well from his early power activation. It served him well even for his first breath in his position.

Once his eyes returned to their usual blue, the first thing he saw was his crown and familiar staff, a child shyly offering them to him.

Time to now take it and use them as his symbol of reign.

Ludwig, sending a smile to the small boy, reached and took his crown, his extend as he placed it on his head shaking, but admiring how it fitted, how it elevated him newly, facing the crowds ready and powerful.

Feliciano had never seen him more beautiful and fitting to his new position.

“The Aces have accepted me. I am now the kingdom’s King,” he shouted in right impotence, leaving all in awe, but not stopping them from their shouts and jumps in celebration, drums rolling, all the crowds becoming quite a mess as some hugged and even threw drinks of feast.

Ludwig couldn’t help his laugh, waving to his family, seeing both his grandmother and mother having to wipe away tears. Ludwig held the staff proudly in his hand, the first of his commands being the wave to get the trumpets and drums to roll, a sign to help him bring silence to all once again.

It was now time for the kingdom to have a new queen.

Ludwig smiled at Feliciano, giving him the confidence to move forward to Kiku, who smiled just as believing.

“Ready?”

Feliciano sighed, “sì.”

It was still riddled incredibly with worry, but Kiku had to continue the ceremony, only wishing that Feliciano will find the confidence as the power and magic settled well in him.

That clap again, the chanting returning, something different this time happening, and that was how the eyes of every statue in the alter began to glow, along with other symbols of importance, something that none in the room had seen for a coronation. Kiku had to continue on, ignore everything and hide his curiosity.

“I present to you all, Feliciano Valenti, from the province of Italy, arising Queen of Hearts. Take him and accept him as the new Heartian Queen, to serve and fulfill to his kingdom for the length necessary. He presents himself in all self and truth, ready for your new power that he will use for protection, prosperity, growth and strengthening for the kingdom.” He didn’t even have to pick the symbol this time, it flew off from the pillow, reaching Feliciano faithfully, who couldn’t help moving back fearful. The orchestra and the drummers had to continue a song no matter how rare this was, even as the medallion began to spin rapidly, more so than any had seen it in, it sparks of red and gold more powerful. Kiku was finding it really hard to concentrate with his chant, when all the surroundings were just exploding in new things that he hadn’t planned for. He had to completely stop when the rays of the medallion spurt out in large rays, instantly taking Feliciano in an electrocuted embrace, all worried and Ludwig neared wanting this rare thing to stop. To all it seemed painful and many stood ready to take action for if things turned worst.

As the blinding light dimmed, the first thing they noticed was the gentle calm in Feliciano’s expression, as if he was in a very fulfilling sleep, letting this light spread on him beautiful red marks, his powerful golden and rubied halo, as well as long majestic wings that could have the potent to cover the entire church. As more of the light left, they saw that Feliciano was beautifully laid in this light, letting it embrace him softly like the petal of flowers, alighting his clothes and adding more golds, stars and even new flowers, until it began to leave in a slow dim and Feliciano could stand on the floor again. All lay in such a stupefaction, from the children to even the drummers outside, all with questions but watchful over what Feliciano would say.

Feliciano let the wings rise, let his opened red blinded eyes gaze over to the heavens, before he could relax this new power, before he could breathe out all that excess, the marks, the wings, the halo, all disappearing in beautiful red and gold dust across the church until he was back to his usual that everyone knew, if even the new additions in his ceremonial suit. He opened his eyes, smiling to the child who held the pillow with his crown, going as far as to even lay one of the flowers he was decorated with on his hair, caressing his cheek kindly, before his hands went for the grasp of his crown. He placed it slowly, only slightly adjusting so some of his curls could fit, but yet it shone elegantly on him, looking as ready as Ludwig and Kiku, all powerful new royals now standing together with their crowns, finalizing the set, Feliciano turning to announce it.

“The Aces have accepted me. I am now the kingdom’s Queen. We are complete and the kingdom officially has new rulers. We are to serve and we hope to be all that you want and dream.” And he bowed in that promise to all, one the crowds accepted with shouts, celebration, dance, jumps, a mess to be honest, with some of the dancers throwing ceremoniously white and red rose petals to cover the entire church. It was the sign to get the ones from outside exploding as well, a good sign for if the message was not heard well enough by the callers. This very same feast continued outside, different songs in the air, quite a mess of people and now rose petals that made it quite difficult for the now three rulers to

find their friends and families throughout the crowds. They had to deal with smiling, just waving, Ludwig happily taking Feliciano's hand and the now Queen accepting that warming hold, a reminder that…holy Aces, they were married.

Yes, they were crowned, but still there were a series of things to be done. The guards came as that reminder, ushering them to take a back door through the alter, before the crowds turned too rowdy and wanted to celebrate by embracing the new royals.

They were given a silent hall, with not even a guard to disrupt this discovery, this chance for their own celebration. At first, they remained frozen, as if the steps they were to take were in new feet, new eyes to take new glances. Feliciano was the one who dared break from that stillness, to jump and then take his now Jack and King into an embrace, full of laughs and twirls that the others had feared that they would fall to the floor with, thus dirtying and ruining their immaculate clothing.

"I never thought this day would come, and I never thought things would turn out so wonderfully," Feliciano bellowed, still in his caresses, in his laughs, in his pull to get the three of them in swirls.

"I assured you enough of that," Kiku reminded with a smile.

"It was more than any of us could have hoped for," Ludwig joined in the sentiment, caressing Feliciano's hair, pulling him apart so they could hold to each other on their own, drown the hall in their kiss, long, extravagant…and Kiku was starting to feel awkward. He coughed, pointing his eyes then to the extend of the hall. Ludwig and Feliciano departed with a shy blush, apologizing to Kiku, but they still kept a grasp of their hands, with a nod letting Kiku lead them forward, the three nervous to what they were approaching, the shouts outside only intimidating more.

A spiral of stairs they raised, majestic, decorated extravagantly in their royal welcome, an occasional guard bowing excitedly and they would smile and wave, reaching then an alighted height, flowers from the decree still blowing across the air, the day shinning in blue, the celebration getting louder and louder.

It was a large frontal balcony, decorated in roses and different kind of flowers with symbols to their provinces. There were flags and banners hanging from the balustrades, marking well the three figures that presented themselves before the immense multitudes, a crowd so large that Feliciano thought it could extend all the way to the mountains. No silence could be achieved, they all shouted, sang, danced, pointed, making it all a wave that the three, even now as the proud rulers, could not find in their power to make stop.

They presented, trumpets blown, new flags released in the decoration of the castle and the crowds only became more vivid, a wilder array of colors that left the three frozen as to how they should react to this immensity. Kiku was the one to dare first and wave how he could to all, Ludwig and Feliciano following his lead.

This was the first time they presented themselves to their kingdom as the new royals. They had to address well, bow, throw more petals and even random blessings.

It wasn't just the new positions of power.

Ludwig halted his wave, to instead place a gentle hand around his now husband's waist, pulling him close, a smile that revealed enough the intense happiness he currently felt, showing itself well all throughout him. Feliciano felt the same, and in its peak, he responded with a nearing, Ludwig answering to it in a meet of their lips for all to see. They didn't think the crowds could turn any crazier, could get any louder or even colorful. It was a reaction that Ludwig and Feliciano smiled at between their kiss.

Although still held together, they turned to place their focus on the crowds again, with smiles and waves for as long as they were to show themselves to their people anew.

It was then truly celebrated in a feast, the ballroom decorated in the most lavish the new royals had seen it in, with red flowers, dozens of flags and pillars showing richly the symbols of the kingdom. People kept coming in and out to enjoy from the food, the words, the wishes, and the dancing that Ludwig and Feliciano did well to enjoy throughout most of the day. They danced with their parents, grandparents, brothers, good friends, the other royals from the different kingdoms, and of course, their little nephew, Augustino. It extended well, late into the night, with still wandering groups of drunks singing loud anthems of the kingdom. Many had gone up to rest, and currently they were dragging Kiku out of the ballroom, exhausted and too weak to even walk. Ludwig and Feliciano stayed to help in cleaning.

"Ludwig, you are king now! You don't have to do this!" Aldrich had to come and take the broom from Ludwig's grasp.

"We made a large mess, and as king, I should take full responsibility."

Aldrich rolled his eyes, "it's only a dusting. We have more than enough servants to take care of this. Today is for you to celebrate, to rest, because from tomorrow on thigs will start to get more difficult than you had thought. Why don't you go ahead and get to bed, besides, you still have another way to celebrate with your queen," he smirked, his seventy-nine year old grandfather just smirked and teased him about something intimate that was expecting of him and Feliciano tonight. Ludwig blushed heavily, and trying to turn away from that gaze, settled instead on his husband, talking about with his grandmother, surely the woman giving him the same words to head off and leave.

Gorgeous, shinning still with his ceremonial suite, his curls and expression still energetic, his smile enamoring, his figure a temptation that was already beginning to sing. Their eyes met, Feliciano staring with those same thoughts, admiring stature, intensity, power, a body that could so easily engulf him in great heat. Ludwig had to look away before it got any more intense, only heading back to his grandfather's smirk.

"Go on then," Aldrich whispered lastly, going over to reach his wife and leave, just as Feliciano proceeded towards Ludwig, shy, hesitant, so meek yet so appetizing.

"Um…can we head to our room now?"

Ludwig was at a lost of words, but after a moment he answered, “sure.”

They headed upwards as by routine, although their hands intertwined, Feliciano skipping and playing, while Ludwig spun and complimented him.

“We should get you a suit like mine,” Feliciano suggested, entering the room, already beginning to remove by taking off his crowns, to be placed in an important safe alongside Ludwig’s.

“I admit it’s too flowery. I don’t think it will fit me.” Ludwig could finally remove his cape, his sash, most of his seals, to be well placed in his wardrobe, respective if even not shown.

“You would look wonderful with flowers, Ludwig!” Feliciano yet excited, quite quickly having finished with most of his suit, leaving him only in the underneath white blouse.

“I have to disagree with you, as I do not-” he turned to see his husband in that last blouse before their bed, turned to face one of the curtains, Feliciano tempted to open them and let plentiful moonlight inside. In that questioning, he threaded his hands through his curls, simply spinning in a way that left Ludwig without another word to say. Feliciano was too lost in his thoughts to notice, even beginning to unbutton his blouse, only revealing more pristine skin to shine and make Ludwig the more shaking. It was when Feliciano felt that new cold in his skin that he peeked behind him, noticing the stare, the silence, Ludwig gave him, admiring and already unraveling, with a want that Feliciano was ready to respond to. But how?

To be honest, they were both nervous, shaking, their heads filled with all kind of questions. What should they do? How should they start? Feliciano tested by rubbing his hands over his arms, the blouse falling more and more, a curve revealed that was just the spark to get Ludwig to finally move. Ludwig told himself to trust that instinct, that want, that desire, to let him govern how he wanted that body, that love.

Shyly, but yet with a soft touch, he let his arms and hands wrap and caress gently at Feliciano’s now naked waist, testing, slowly approaching until he could lean his chin on his shoulder. Feliciano smiled and leaned back, their heads in a comforting cuddle, just for scents, for Ludwig to begin placing kisses on the area, truly innocent and not the intense heat Feliciano was expecting. Ludwig pulled him closer, until his arms were now tight around him, and Feliciano managed a raise of his arm to caress at his hair.

“Bring me to the bed,” Feliciano said, a seductive whisper as he now began to caress gentle fingers on his chin.

Even as Ludwig was screaming in his inner being, he somehow managed to easily carry him and take him as asked, making sure Feliciano lay comfortably as he now towered above him, with not another touch to give.

Yes, he wanted Feliciano, ravage him all completely until not an inch of his body was left without his love, but that moment, the feeling that towered above all others was actually stress and fear.

Many times they had acted with an almost reach to intimacy, but there was always a barrier that didn't permit it, and up till now Ludwig and Feliciano had been obedient to its standing. But now…that wall was completely gone, eradicated by their marriage. They had all the freedom, they could act as they wish and make heaven in their room. There was nothing, absolutely nothing to stop them, but for Ludwig, it was like that wall had just crashed and fallen on him, leaving him without space to reach out. Feliciano, who showed to be calm, began to worry, raising his hands to caress at the side of his face, hoping to aid.

"Ludwig…are you all right?" He asked so gently and beautiful, only getting Ludwig more distressed.

"Feliciano…" he had to be honest.

"Mhm?"

"I… can't do this…" He took a hand to kiss. "I love you, you have no idea of the joy it brings me to finally be married to you. I do, I do want to make love to you, so badly, but tonight… I…I don't feel comfortable."

He expected to be able to breathe now, but now he was concerned with how Feliciano would respond, expecting thunder and lightning. But he was blessed, he knew more so when Feliciano smiled, still continuing his lovely caressing through his face.

"Ludwig, I decided to wait and be patient for you even before I took the promise necklace… even before I knew what it meant. If you don't feel comfortable tonight, we won't. Just because it's expected of us, doesn't mean we have to."

"It's just…everybody does it and it's sort of like…a job even."

A hint of that lighting and thunder came in a small instant in those big brown eyes. "This is not supposed to be a job, Ludwig. It's supposed to be a moment of profound love, trust and beauty. It's not just for the kingdom and position, it's for us, for us alone to do as we wish. I thought you've learned enough that we don't have to do as everyone else has done. This is our reign, and we will do as we see fit." He was sweet again, raising slightly to place a gentle kiss on his lips, enough to truly bring back calm to Ludwig's being.

"It was a really busy day. We got married, crowned, then dinned and danced. Were exhausted and we'll be very busy from tomorrow on. It's all right if we don't have sex tonight. A better chance will appear later on, and no matter when it is, I'll be ready for you." Feliciano smiled against his lips, wrapping his arms around him, pulling Ludwig to finally lay on top of him, comfortable, relaxed and peaceful. Ludwig sighed in great relief, making himself comfortable in the crook of Feliciano's neck, truly wanting that sleep.

"Thank you, thank you so much. I love you, I love you truly above everything else…my Queen." How fitting, how beautiful and how complete. Feliciano kept his eyes widened, those words repeated well through his head, not letting him an ounce of sleep for a long moment.

He was Queen, he is married to his King, a man perfect in his arms, resting away the activities of the day. Feliciano was in his position, this was to be his life from now on and oh how happy, how happy he truly was.

He smiled, placing a last kiss to Ludwig's hair. "I love you too, above everything even in the heavens, my King."

Chapter 63

It was sometimes odd to think that there would be an alignment by the end of the year, one that would bring about a war, a monstrous Khaos that was surely capable of destroying everything they knew and loved, but things continued in quite the peace, the new royals' beginning reign one of calm and much business and preparations. It was this constant training, strengthening and action that the new rulers committed themselves to that gave the rest of the kingdom hope and belief that no such harsh evils would befall on them as they had done in the war of the blackened decades.

As they were told and warned, taking the full kingdom did involve a lot of work and activities that left no such time for nothing or mindless wandering. Every time they thought something was done and they could perhaps enjoy from a nice nap, something always did arise that needed their attention. It was aggravating of course, but it was always worth the great outcomes that played out in the lives of their people. To be honest, right now the only thing that was bringing exhilaration, the one thing that the three royals were honestly looking forward to every morning, were their magic training sessions.

Kiku had to focus, had to focus on whatever inner silence and peace he could utter, to block everything, leaving him in a sort of bubble to take time to think, chant, all while a simulated storm continued around him. Decided on how he wanted his power to reach and showcase, he focused on that spell, expanding his arms, pressing his hands, until piercing slabs arose from the ground. Instantly, the wind now not as powerful, for Kiku had used its blown to make the dangerous towers that surrounded him, protecting him from his current enemies. Sadly, one of his foes today had perfected well a technique, and before he knew it, he was on the ground, Feliciano in the vicinity with a proud smirk, having easily tripped him in his distraction, using a spell on his eyes to keep good watch of Kiku throughout everything. But Kiku was not so easily calling defeat, he quickly stood up and both started a hand to hand combat, fierce and dangerous as any serious battle. Kiku seemed to have the upper hand as he was the one that kept shooting power at Feliciano's chest, but the other did well to defend, using protection spells and doing what he could to strengthen them while he thought about his next move. He called forth red balls of fire to hang across the room, setting an aim and coming forward to reign. Kiku had to depart, jumping and swaying away from all their burns successfully.

Ludwig was done with watching, he had assessed the situation enough, he could take place, he could take out his staff and fight. Taking energy from what was left of Feliciano's fireball spell, he arose them into the same spheres, raging now on both his targets, both rushing off to avoid them as much as they could.

At one point, Feliciano had tired of running, instead making a large shield that expanded throughout the entire training area, the reigns landing harshly on the glass he created, even protecting Kiku. It was not strong enough though, as it had broken and the reign continued, making Ludwig actually smile at how well he had perfected this spell.

Feliciano was quick with an idea.

He took those reigning fires, taking their energy and instead pulling them to his command, then aimed at Ludwig, who had to jump away and find cover elsewhere.

Sometimes he forgot that with their marriage, the union of their power became stronger, giving more access for each to take control of their spells.

Ludwig decided on using a speeding spell, one that had him practically flying until he was before Feliciano, staff ready to inflict. Feliciano was actually confident in a shield he created himself over his arms, using them also as a weapon to fight against the slashes and throws of Ludwig's staff, this time the shield standing to continue in plight.

Feliciano managed to get enough force to be able to push Ludwig to the ground, practically squishing him with the shield, gaining enough power to go high, then gather power, energy from all around reaching in an electrical hold that shone deadly to all who watched. Both Ludwig and Kiku panicked, not knowing if they could deal with something of that magnitude.

"Stop! Stop! Stop!" Egilhard called loudly in worry.

Feliciano stopped himself before all that spell could be freed, the light leaving off the room until it was washed in its usual earth tones. All the magic, even the one that had Feliciano so high up in the air, began to wear off, and so the Queen found himself hurling forward to the ground, screaming and wailing. Lucky for him, he had a husband that was ready and had got himself placed in the right position, catching him in an elegant manner as if it was all a theatrical plan.

"Are you all right, liebling?" Ludwig worried, caressing him dear in the reach of his hands.

"Yes, yes, amore. Was just a little scared. Thank you!" He nuzzled close, placing a quick kiss on his lips before he could stand on the ground again.

Egilhard and Kiku reached them with smiles. "Excellent work as always, men. You have proven yourselves enough to start a new chapter of the Enda charts."

Feliciano clapped, knowing that it meant more mental spells, having to reach a deeper part of their beings and to not even word out incantations as they did them.

"How about we start in two days, if it sets well in your schedules?"

"I don't think we'll have a problem," Feliciano thought.

"We will be here," Kiku bowed.

"I'm sure we'll all be looking forward," Ludwig appreciated.

"Perfect then! By the way, your majesty, next time, be more controlling and careful when dealing with higher level spells. I know we're preparing ourselves for a powerful war, but this is only our training sessions and you're fighting against your husband and Jack. Leave all that power for our enemies, for now. Don't be so forceful," he advised.

Feliciano bowed in agreement, “will do my best!”

“Very well, gentlemen, you’re free to go!” And the three were off.

Kiku went ahead to deal with some issues concerning the schedules of new servants in the castle, Ludwig was supposed to talk to the guards of the city concerning some recent crimes and Feliciano was supposed to deal with some archives concerning population in the kingdom. Yet both the royals found themselves taking a detour through a less populated hall, alone for them to laugh, spin about like children and just have some chats, a freedom from the recent straining. It was the line they needed to not have them on the brink of insanity because of the large workload they had recently gotten, for a moment of love, to gaze into their eyes and let whatever sweet caress thread through their skin. Sometimes it was too much, a largeness that Ludwig couldn’t take in movement, having to drag Feliciano to the wall to hold him against it, keeping himself between him just to really take it all as it should be. They would laugh, settle in a moment of gazes, and then kiss, giving themselves the chance to intensify, to grow their moment in soft lips, then tongue, perhaps a bite that would leave their lips in a beautiful shade of plump red. They moaned, hands began moving elsewhere. Feliciano kept his on Ludwig’s back, sometimes coming to the front and caressing his chest and stomach, while Ludwig let his traverse his thighs, in that moment daring a grab of his rear, pushing him forward to himself, a slight grinding that was indeed inappropriate if they were out in the castle halls. Someone could- a sudden cough, both turning to face Abasi, who had the misfortune of catching them like this. They instantly dropped and detached themselves, embarrassingly having to clean saliva each from their mouths.

“Ye-yes, yes, Abasi, what’s the matter?” Feliciano asked, fixing himself as if the White kingdom citizen hadn’t spotted them as they were.

“Feliciano, my brethren want a moment to speak to you. And Ludwig, your family is waiting to have lunch with you,” Abasi brought back again the orders expected of their castle, of back to business and to the never-ending ordeals.

“Yes.”

“We will head immediately,” Ludwig made sure.

“Very well then.”

Ludwig left a last kiss on Feliciano’s lips before he made his way down the known hall to the lunch room, while Feliciano, pouting slightly at not having Ludwig or eating, followed behind Abasi.

“…I really…do not want to use it,” Feliciano admitted to all, looking rather fearful to his new weapon, Augusta’s harp.

“You were pretty adamant the first few days. What’s wrong now?” Kandake wondered, leaning, taking her eyes away from the book she was reading, of the many Ludwig and Feliciano had taken from Khaos.

The harp itself seemed to join her in this questioning.

“It’s just…too powerful…”

“Isn’t that what we need,” Abasi added.

“Yes, and I’m sure I will use it in the war…but now-”

“What happened?” Kandake guessed as much.

“I…burned myself once…and…almost shot a spell at Augustino,” Feliciano shyly admitted, embarrassed and terrified of those events, proclaiming his decision of halting its use.

All those in the room sighed, trying to find what advice they could give him.

“Feliciano, you have to understand that it’s necessary you master the use of the harp. These fears are simple ones that we can manage to help you with if you discuss it with us. We’ll have a healer in the room always, a trainer, and it will be in a safe spot away from any kinds of infants,” Kandake said hoping it could help.

Feliciano still gripped his hands, trying to find anything else to say that could take him away from this.

“I know…it’s a lot…but it’s exactly what we need if we want a prosperous future.”

“You’ll soon accustom to it and bring forth amazing power in ease, but to do that, we must settle a strict training regime that is constant and can help you truly get acquainted with it,” another mentioned.

“I studied well Augusta’s use of the harp through writings left behind. I think I can serve as a fitting tutor,” Abasi was proud, standing tall and prepared as if he was to start teaching that very moment.

Feliciano was left with no exit this time, breathing out whatever worry he held, having to accept, looking to the harp and removing any fear of what could happen in his use.

He sighed, “promise that there would be healers and that no one would be allowed into that room unless it’s for urgent business. Also…be patient and understanding…I’m still getting used to having so much power and I am sometimes intimidated. I very much will appreciate it all.”

They all bowed, “yes, your majesty.”

Feliciano didn’t think he would ever get used to that.

They filled the table in frivolous chat, about drama with musicians, Gilbert trying out a new instrument, how a citizen painted a building in a green color instead of the demanded red and

how Ludwig should do something about it. He pouted, focused on his food and when his family will finish this sudden reunion, part of him thinking this to be wasteful discussion.

“-I mean, I know when to get down and ready, unlike Ludwig here, who is married and has still not consummated with his husband,” Gilbert declared in an ease to all.

Ludwig choked, coughing and all turning to worry and help with his sudden dilemma.

“Can we refrain speaking about these things at the table,” Ludwig tried to diverge.

“It’s nothing to be ashamed about, Ludwig,” Monika said, not being at all alarmed.

“Feliciano told us you’re waiting for the opportune moment,” Reinhardt added.

“I think it’s something very sweet.”

“But boring!” Gilbert had to ruin.

“Gilbert…” their mother would scold still, even with her children being two grown adults, one a king even.

“Come on, mutti, doesn’t the kingdom need that kind of energy magic from them.”

“The kingdom is perfectly stable, something that Ludwig, Feliciano and Kiku had done well to place in their recent crowning.”

“It’s also private and I would prefer if it’s something that stays between me and my queen.” Despite Ludwig’s seriousness, the gaze his family laid on him was as if he had said some bad joke. Gilbert offered to laugh to not make his little brother feel bad. Ludwig glared at him.

“What?” The older was now truly lost.

“My sex life…it’s private!” He thought it obvious, not something that he should declare as he did.

“Well…to a certain extent, it is,” Monika began to awkwardly explain.

“To a certain extent? What do you mean?” He was starting to get scared.

“Don’t worry, it’s not like they write everything you do in the bedroom to a newspaper for the whole kingdom to read,” Monika wanted to assure before anything.

“Yet I’m starting to get that something happens…what happens?” Ludwig neared to know.

“It’s only a small thing, something quite beautiful and plentiful that florist and farmers look forward to, especially when it’s the first time a King and Queen make love.”

“But…what happens?” Ludwig still demanded to know.

“You’ll see when the time comes,” Reinhardt thought he could finish it as.

“Exactly. I can tell you that basically the whole kingdom will know that you have finally consummated.”

“This makes me feel unsettled,” Ludwig admitted, getting all to chuckle.

“Don’t worry, it’s only natural. Just don’t feel pressured into anything. As I said, you and Felicano’s moment would come, you will see and I’m sure it would be amazing for you both,” Monika smiled.

“Thank you, Mutti…but can we please stop talking about these kind of things at our lunch table.”

Augustino was learning something new each day. By now he was an active crawler, picking things, laughing and being more aware of the many games Feliciano played with him. He especially loved it when his uncle would spin him about, loud laughter that buried the room in enchantment, his parents smiling in wonder at the joy their son created.

“Tino, Tino, Augusto, Augustino,” Feliciano would always sing to him, earning the most adorable claps from the infant.

“Will you all stop,” Lovino would still beg.

“He loves it,” Feliciano would coo as he rubbed their noses together, the boy still loudly laughing.

Ludwig entered the room, the stress in his expression from his recent king dealings dwindling at the site of his nephew and husband so close and loving.

“Ciao, Ludwig,” Feliciano greeted. The baby boy mumbling some incoherency in call for him in join.

“It’s pretty late. Shouldn’t Augustino be resting by now?” Ludwig thought, not stopping in coming forward, taking the boy in his arms to play and coo as the other had done.

“He’s having fun right now,” Antonio saw.

“Won’t do so until you leave him alone,” Lovino groaned, eyes heavy with countless sleepless nights of having to watch his son.

“Then, Feliciano, we better leave them,” Ludwig suggested, receiving a pout reaction from Feliciano.

The uncle placed one last kiss on Augustino’s head before Ludwig gave him to Lovino, who held him as gently and lovingly, a comforting hold that had Augustino yawning, eyes dimming and surely ready to fall asleep that instant. Both parents were relieved, coming close, both so tired that they might as well take sleep there with their son. Ludwig and Feliciano decided to leave silently, held hands, waiting to be a sufficient distance to speak of their day and activities, a beautiful routine that had fallen as they made their way every night

to their room. As they would undress, lay on their bed, they would set a chorus of kisses and gentle touches across their bodies. Never too heated, never enough to instigate something too passionate. Sometimes, as they would gaze as deeply as they did into their eyes, seeing stars and ethereal lights, did they wonder if this would be the night they would truly give up and let themselves engulf in the furthest reaches of love. Worry, nervousness and fear would win out, not that they minded just resting well in their arms, cuddled, an occasional kiss to aid in their dreams.

They continued to have the patience to wait.

It was a day of training like any other, all the royals called to practice their strength, all the full necessary for the war. Ludwig, Feliciano and Kiku had come down excited, ready to try out new things that they had read about and their teacher would explain. They were giddy, and the teacher was just as so, smiling as he explained the basics to spells without the use of word, how it had to do with mind, concentration, reaching to a depth of their being and managing well control of it. They started with simple exercises, like creating a light spell that usually needed words, in the hold of their hands, gravitating and growing at the wish Egilhard asked to watch and guide their potential. He thought them to have done wonderful, increasing, diminishing, no matter, they did well to deal with the amounts.

He thought it safe to move on to other spells, ones of more strength like changing the color of certain objects in the room, aiming fire at targets, making shields, throwing lethal weapons at far distances and even lifting heavy objects. By the afternoon, Egilhard found them ready to do their usual combat, and so the three took their positions and readied themselves to fight.

“Yes! I would love to see all kinds of strong releases, but remember, this is just practice, so be careful and don’t hurt your companions,” was the last warning he shouted before he signaled them to begin.

The three nodded, Feliciano rushing off forward to start. He began by doing an earth quaking spell, directed towards Kiku, who did well to jump between cracks. No matter how Feliciano intensified it, Kiku always managed an escape. Because of the determination he was keeping, it was late when he noticed the impending approach of his husband. Ludwig was ready to inflict an unconsciousness spell, but Feliciano rolled out of target just in time, Ludwig hitting the ground instead. They began their practiced hand to hand combat, Ludwig impressed at the strength Feliciano had grown to stand his strong ones, showing no mercy and Feliciano managed to continue to hit on with ones that would surely leave Ludwig with bruises later on.

At one point, Feliciano’s defenses had failed and in one push, Ludwig brought him to the ground. Ludwig was ready to inflict him with another powerful spell, but Feliciano had moved just in time to avoid it. Feliciano had once again tried that energy spell, picking it all in balls of light to use, now against Kiku as well as he joined Ludwig in attacks towards him.

It had worked wonderfully for a while, Egilhard applauding from his watching position, but Kiku had found an entrance, making Feliciano trip and loose the concentration he had to keep while the rest of the orbs floated. Even as he had fallen, he managed to keep them attacking,

something that neither Ludwig or Kiku were expecting, having to avoid hurriedly and with fret.

It was small, an accident, a little cut that Ludwig usually wouldn't have given it importance. He had received far worst. Yet that instant, in the fury of this pretend battle, it surged him with menace, with revenge, with a rare fulfill to make someone pay for this. Kiku thought this to just be a cringe, something that he could get over and continue on as they should.

Ludwig tended to calculate his every move before acting, but here, he headed straight on, unthinking, creating a sort of shield to use against Feliciano. It was powerful, hard for Feliciano to stand against, failing each time to keep himself from falling to the ground again.

Egilhard felt something amiss, standing from his calm sitting position, a sign for others in the area to know that something was not going as it should. Many soldiers prepared to intervene if anything.

Feliciano for now was dealing, managing to push Ludwig back enough to run and keep a safe distance.

"Ludwig… you're being a bit hard, you know," he commented out of breath, unheard to Ludwig who headed on, for a moment that Feliciano thought he could take a break, that he could lower his defenses, even came to a kneel as he regained energy.

He did not expect the tremulous shadow, Ludwig raising his hand high, using a magic that was…dark, a spell unfamiliar, fearful, away from his caring self that didn't let him stop, didn't let him control his attack, and in his unwatchfulness, he landed it on his own husband.

"Healers! Healers! Get the healers!" Ludwig could hear Egilhard shout in this sudden haze, dizzy, confused, even wondering where he stood. This sudden energy was gone, leaving him weak, tumbling, trying to find some sense of order. A sudden familiar whimpering was enough to strike sense, to place him back in a picture he could see, spotting Feliciano crouched down, holding to himself tightly as his body shook.

"Feliciano…Feliciano…" Ludwig tried to call, coming down to reach, finally seeing the blood, the darkening of one side of his body, veins pumping in an awful white that was like porcelain being broken.

"Feliciano…Feliciano!" The panic came, taking Feliciano in his arms, giving a closer look at what happened…at what he did, he painfully realized.

"Mmm…Ludwig…" Felciano could mumble, in and out of consciousness.

"I…I…I…I…" what could he say? What could he do? He caused this…He caused this! But still, what was it? What was it that he even did? Dear Aces, what could he even tell Feliciano?

"I…I…don't know what I did…I don't know what this is…Feliciano, please, stay, they'll be getting help now."

Feliciano could only nod, that small action enough to have him trembling the more as if he was caught by a horrible cold breeze. Ludwig tried to warm him by pulling him closer, embracing him with a large amount of fear, one that didn't even let him see people come close, trying to take Feliciano.

"Your majesty, he needs attention immediately," one tried to convince.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, my darling," Ludwig continued to beg, whimpering, refusing to let go of Feliciano, as if his own touch was enough to cure everything as he wished.

"Ludwig…Ludwig…I-I know yo-you're sorry, I-I'm sure it's something we-we can explain, but-but let them…he-heal me first." It was hurting so much to speak.

It was that assurance that had Ludwig finally moved out of the shell he tried to create for them, helping the healers in placing Feliciano on an emergency bed. It was an amount of five that carried him, Ludwig one of them, refusing to leave his side, holding his hand and continuing to word his apology. He would have gone to the healing room and stayed for the whole process, but here he had to be pulled, maddening, finding it all a disobedience to him the king. Many who were in the area winced and some were fearful to face him, having to get the must braved healer to calm Ludwig, wording to trust them in their profession and why it was necessary that Feliciano entered alone. It took Gilbert's entrance to get him to sit down, a harsh scolding that was reminiscent to many of their childhood days. As Gilbert went on with rants on Ludwig's behavior, Ludwig sat and already waited, his gaze settled on the doors of the nursing room, agitating for Feliciano, wanting to know he was well, wanting to know he was safe. He gripped his hands, cursing whatever magic did this, shedding to all, whimpering and letting himself the tears that fell, Gilbert stopping to hold him dear, soothing what he could…when neither understood for what yet.

Chapter 64

Chapter Notes

> I continue to take forever posting, but please be patient, work …plus a lot of traveling now that I'm back in Europe. Posting this from Germany, more specifically and fantastically, from the Heart's Kingdom capital, Berlin. I hope you enjoy and continue to await updates…even if sometimes they take months.
>
> … Also, WARNING: THIS CHAPTER HAS NSFW

They couldn't explain it as anything else. It had been dark magic, Khaos's magic especially. Ludwig had created dark magic with ease, letting it control him and be used to attack Feliciano. When they had announced it to a room full of dignitaries, all those eyes fell on him with question, fear and precaution, some who stood by him moving aside, fearing that he was capable of releasing it that instant. Ludwig hadn't been able to take that silence, those judging eyes, as if they were glaring to Khaos instead of the Heartian King. He left the room when he couldn't take that aggravation, hands tightening, biting his lips to not let himself shout, scream, even tear up for the castle to see. The slam he gave to the doors as he exited made many cringe, while others thought on how they could help, some beginning to know that they had to begin the books of generational power and Khaos's dark magic.

It took three days for Feliciano to fully heal and be allowed leave of the nursing room. He did so with energy and elation, the type that made many question if he had truly been hit by a dark spell.

More important than anything was meeting with Ludwig, embracing and assuring each other of their ever-present love, as well as ready to research and find out about this new side his king just presented.

Ludwig hadn't come to visit him at all during his time in the nursery room, and when he finally exited, he wasn't there either, just the pierce to bring him into gloom. He settled off to look for him, many in the castle telling him the same of not knowing whereabouts, of how they had barely seen him the last few days and how haunting things had felt in the castle since. He checked their room, any rooms of leisure, kitchen, dinning, hall, even the ballroom. He only managed to feel his presence in the King's library, hidden well between its many items, Feliciano knew.

Nobody, only but the King was allowed entrance unless they deemed it so, but Feliciano had already snuck in there enough and his desperation to see Ludwig was stronger than whatever old rule. He gently made his entrance, trying to make his steps subtle, the taps to be confused

with the grand clock in the room. He settled deeper into the many old shelves of books, deep into its engulfment, not spotting Ludwig yet and fearing he wouldn't be here either. That's when he caught the sound of fabric, as gentle as his steps, Feliciano only catching it because he heightened his senses to find his beloved. He didn't reveal himself instantly, watching instead as Ludwig leaned back on an old stack of books, playing with a deep red ribbon, wrapping it rather harshly around his hand. He didn't word, stressed, and Feliciano feared he was even trying to hold his breath as he made this exercise. He would cover his hand in the ribbon, turn it about as if trying to find some change, before he untangled and started again in his other hand.

"Amore…" he called gently, thankfully not startling him, only an empty rise of his eyes, before he turned back to his activity. He gave him no greeting, not even something whispered, like back in those days that he pretended he wasn't there. Feliciano would not let that happen again. He let himself come near, wrapping his arms around his own, laying on his shoulder, and despite whatever blocking Ludwig tried to do, he leaned towards it, for once stopping his wrapping, breathing and actually relaxing.

"I missed you," Feliciano started.

"It was…only three days." Although he had missed him as much, holding himself from letting his arms wrap around him.

"Are you…are you all right?" Feliciano then took his face, forcing him to look into him, watching the other soothe in those bright brown eyes.

Ludwig sighed, given up to them. "I hurt you…I am not," he managed to admit, trembling as he raised his hands, dearly placing them on Feliciano's arms, ever so softly pulling him closer. Feliciano let himself fall and completely be depended on his arms, his chest, his usual embrace.

"I'm certain that it wasn't you."

"Feliciano-"

"I know you would never, ever, do something like that against me." He hated to mention this, but they had to address it. "You hold Romulus's tainted dark magic…we…should have expected this," he saddened.

Ludwig sighed, becoming looser. "I shouldn't have done this either way…I really should have…kept my distance in the end. I did what I did to protect you…and I failed horribly at it. Our marriage only made this stronger…this wasn't supposed to happen…this isn't what I was planning."

Feliciano only held tighter, insulted, biting away tears. "No," he scolded rather harshly in this comfort. "Our marriage was our destiny, our happiness and just the strength this kingdom needs." He looked up to Ludwig again, shinning eyes resonated well in this dark room. "I am blessed to have you as my husband and will risk anything to always keep you mine. We got Khaos's books for a reason and I promised you that we will find a way to deal with this with the information. I admit we were focused on other readings and we could have momentarily

forgotten…but it's never too late to get you in control of it, to even use it in our favor," Feliciano trusted and hoped.

"After what I did to you, I refuse to use that magic again."

"The best way to come into terms and control it, is by accepting it. Whether you like it or not, it's still a power that's part of you and it's there for your disposal. I know it's scary and…with what happened to me especially, but we'll be really careful, and make sure you learn everything so you can make something that is Khaos's yours. I'm sure you won't do this again."

Ludwig felt like he hadn't smiled since the day of the accident, chuckling and taking a dear hold of Feliciano's hand. He raised it to his lips to kiss in length, then letting it caress over his jaw.

"I was also in the same position when…finding about all this and…having to use Augusta's harp. It is intimidating, but…I've learned that the best way in dealing with it, is facing it head on, unafraid and confident."

"When did you become so wise?" Ludwig chuckled.

"I am Queen of Hearts, Ludwig! I have to show my position proud."

"Even when you cry when you read those horror stories?"

"Of course!"

"And when you're the real rainbow cookie thief."

Sudden silence.

"How did you know that?" Feliciano trusted to reveal himself.

"You left them in our room, plain to see."

"Fine, I might be Queen but I still don't know how to behave."

They laughed and enjoyed from this small innocent moment.

Thus the studying began, the intense reading that kept Ludwig awake for hours in their shared bed, Feliciano most of the time having to take the books away from his hand so he could focus on getting some rest. Egildhard and others who had dedicated to learning about dark magic, would sit on for hours with Ludwig, getting him to try basic spells, getting that very control he wanted and even other difficult tactics that he did well to master and grow. Ludwig begged for the confining spot they had for this specific kind of training, no one but his given teachers, healers in the area at whatever emergency and ready cleansing potions that Ludwig liked to take afterwards, hoping it could wash away any evil.

After weeks, Egilhard found him ready to join Kiku and Feliciano in their usual battle training. That day, when Ludwig had entered the room, he did so shy and hesitant, afraid to even look at his usual opponents, who in turn smiled and were more than glad to have him back.

“Ludwig! You are back with your rulers!” Egilhard called out from his usual watching spot, the same smile as the Queen and Jack. Feliciano had to hold himself from jumping and clapping.

“Well, the rules had remained the same. I encourage you to try out everything you have learned. We have healers in the vicinity, and we will act quicker than last time if anything. Are you all ready?”

The three nodded, taking their positions, Ludwig the one that looked the most nervous.

“Begin!” Egilhard called out.

Feliciano started and went again with that energy orb spell, but this time, proof of his practice and power increase, he created many more, the training room a beautiful show of lights, and, which was indeed new to Ludwig, there was a reflection on the floor, like that of water. He knew there was reason for it, but for now, it didn’t show any effect. Kiku knew what it did though, having practiced on a spell that avoided its attack, using it to slide through this reflection like ice, ready. Feliciano began to swing dangerous balls of light like it was a game, picking any random one and just hurling, creating quite a beautiful show to Ludwig. Kiku, now unsheathing a pretend sword, began swinging, breaking them apart with a spell of his own. Feliciano, seeing his approach, did the amazement of getting as many orbs as possible to circle like a large ring, pushing it towards Kiku, sparks exploding beautifully in the reflection, hurling and tiring Kiku in silence, now having no other choice than to sit and regain energy, hoping that Ludwig could take it and distract Feliciano.

The King was actually fearful to face him, especially after these new spells that reminded well of his coming as Ace, but he did have to practice himself, and show his King power, and so he ran and began to formulate something in his mind.

Seeing his approach, whatever the reflection held, Feliciano intensified it and so Ludwig found himself slowed, weakening, every movement more of a force to make. Ludwig knew there was something in the dark spells he could use, that could liberate him, but still so hesitant, still so fearful.

When the force of this spell became too much, basically constricting him to slight pain, Ludwig decided on releasing and testing. He conjured a dark rope like light, managing to whip it to the floor, crashing like glass the reflection under him, revealing the familiar terrain of the training room, where he could move as he wished again. Before Feliciano could bring it back, that very same rope that still lingered he used to wrap around Feliciano’s leg, making him trip and loose his spell all completely. Feliciano quickly stood after cutting the rope with a spell of his own, then creating hardened red shields, ready for the close-up combat. Ludwig engulfed his hands in a dark magic, surely to intensify his punches. He was nervous as he walked forward, fearing what it could do if he didn’t keep his control, but Feliciano’s

believing smile as he came closer made him smirk too, bringing forth the confidence to let him throw the first punch.

They kept well in their battle, both their spells doing well to defend and attack, in their deadly rendezvous giving just the time needed for Kiku to fully regain himself. He cut right between them, skillful, hidden, without any kind of expectance, leaving both Ludwig and Feliciano surprised as he managed to stop the dark magic Ludwig had used in his hands. There was a moment of impression as Ludwig now looked to his normal pale hands, Feliciano just as wondered, it was the weakness that Kiku did well to use and trip them.

Kiku stood ready for surely the battle that would come to him, sword, energy spells around him that grew like flowers, ready to act as a shield at whatever their fierceness.

Ludwig and Feliciano gazed between themselves and decided to go at him together. They struck their hands, and from its unwinding they created strong lighting bolts, lighting the entire arena in fierce colors that had many of the soldiers moving back. They stood back to back, uniting, intensifying and making it grow across the room. Kiku was frightful.

In coordination, exact, as they should be one mind as King and Queen, did they raise their hands and omitted their attack. Kiku tried what he could to hold it down with his sword, but it was too powerful, and so he had no other choice than to find cover in a makeshift rock in the area. Ludwig and Feliciano let the lightning dance around the room, loving its splendor and then feeling proud to know that they made it with their combined magic. Kiku couldn't leave them in that for long, and so he settled on strong wind spells, enough to misdirect the direction of the lightning until Ludwig and Feliciano had to cover themselves. They continued using their combine magic to create a shield to protect them. It was in its shadow that Feliciano got an idea.

"I'm going to make this shield grow and blow, but I need you to use a Polynia spell with it."

Ludwig's eyes widened, being that a dark spell. "What? No! We haven't done that combination! It could go horribly wrong!" He heavily worried, using instead more energy to keep the shield going.

"The books do say that it can be combined with other magic! We won't know until we try. It's best if we do it now to practice and see where we could go with it!" Feliciano was so sure and ready, for once Ludwig being the one that feared, still crouching in his position as he kept the shield alive. He breathed, knowing that he could be just as brave, just as powerful and daring.

"All right," he decided, with a determination that made Feliciano smile.

"We'll make sure Kiku doesn't get hurt," Feliciano promised, beginning in silence the spell that made the shield grow as he wanted. Ludwig, still slightly as fearful, began his own incantation, finding concentration and control when he directed the movements of his hand to the ground, letting the spell arise, combining its air with the magic they used for their shield. In amazement to all, they saw the shield grow and even diminish, destroying every spark of lightning Kiku had taken to his control, now heading his direction, ready to attack the poor Jack with all its force. Kiku had no escape, summoning the hands of surrender that made Ludwig and Feliciano win.

In an amazing instant of cease, in a single slash of their hands, the spell engulfed the lightning to nothing, and the shield was gone, peace once again in the training room.

What came next were applauses, from Egilhard and the present soldiers. It was not the kind of reaction they were expecting, but the three royals had smiled, standing and joining to present themselves and hear Egilhard's new words.

"Beautiful work! The three of you! Kiku, you broke a dark spell! How did you do that?"

"It was an intensified Zara spell. I actually read about it in one of Khaos's books."

"We will practice well that spell the next few days then…everyone will," he called out loud for even the soldiers. "And a combine of dark and Heartian magic, amazing! This is the kind of thing you all should do here! Releasing everything you can do to grow our advantages. Ah, each day I see you three fighting here, I grow even more hopeful." And the three agreed, with a breath of relief to keep their minds at bay with issues about the war.

"We shall continue our practices in three days' time."

"I don't believe there's an issue with practicing tomorrow either," Ludwig told.

Egilhard raised an eye, "sir…isn't it your birthday tomorrow?"

To be honest, with all the planning, dark power training, calculating, establishing and law enforcing of taking kingship the passing weeks, Ludwig had all forgotten about his own birthday, seen in the width of his eyes, the stilling of his being, his words froze as he tried to find an explanation that didn't involve telling them that he forgot. The others saw it obvious enough though, smirking.

"I believe I should give you a day to unwind and calm yourself from all the turmoil of war planning, to celebrate a day as the one of your birth. So then, till next time," Egilhard smiled, making his way to leave, along with several soldiers that followed him, ready for their own training regimen.

Usually, when it was a royal's birthday, especially a king's, a new one at that, it was celebrated in the usual lavish ball, but Ludwig had denied it this time, instead just asking for a dinner to spend with his family and some time to relax without any kind of imposing duty. As promised, no rushing servants for the job of the day, no scheduled harsh training, no war planning, no signing, no law abiding, just no one coming to him to break a calm that he had long missed since turning king. He had forgotten the last time he had woken this late in the morning. This time he could enjoy just gazing and cuddling with his husband, not even words to interrupt the serenity.

"I want to give you your present now," Feliciano gleamed, raising in excitement.

"You got me something?" Ludwig was honestly surprised.

“Mhm!” Feliciano stood from the bed and headed over to one of the many drawers in their wardrobe, an area that had been protected by Pookie for a while now, who would hiss and growl every time Ludwig tried to reach for it.

“Good job,” Feliciano congratulated him, picking up a wrapped package, cuddling Pookie before he took his spot in the bed again, handing over the gift, wanting Ludwig to immediately open.

Too slow in Feliciano’s opinion did Ludwig rip the red packaging with a golden bow, until he was presented with a book, a richly decorated one of trees and birds, probably the most beautiful book cover Ludwig had seen in his life. He stared in utter aw at its design before he read the tittle. “All the Adventures of Dietrich and Irmhild…all of them, this actually has all of them,” Ludwig gazed upward to Feliciano curiously, but still with a shine in his eyes that weakened him to childish wonder.

“Yep! All the stories collected from all over the provinces of the Hearts Kingdom. It even has versions from the Japanese province,” Feliciano glowed proudly.

“How…did you find this?”

“It took asking a bunch of Vikings,” Feliciano laughed. “I was looking for a copy for some time now and read that there was a complete collection somewhere in the Norwegian Province. I contacted Lukas and he managed to find it. In return, I paid him a trip to visit his brother in the Spades Kingdom.”

Ludwig already held the item dear, flipping through to the pages to see it golden, well intact, nothing to prove of age or mold. The stories were divided in their province of coming, with art and borders that brought more enchantment in Ludwig’s eyes.

“This is…this is…amazing, perfect, beautiful…thank you!” He was truly taken, not expecting such a touching and rare gift already so early in the morning of his twentieth birthday. He couldn’t keep his eyes off it, tempted to already begin its reading.

“Do you still like them as much as we used to when we were kids?”

“To be honest, not as much, after all, so much time has passed and I grew other interests, but the stories are still dear to me and I was already thinking of re-reading some, just…never had the time or chance.”

Feliciano cuddled closer, his arms well wrapped around him as they belonged. “Well, you have most of the day, and you can read me a story every night before going to sleep,” he fluttered beautifully, Ludwig chuckling and bringing him more into his arms, his eyes detaching from the book for once to stare into his.

“I’ll be glad to.”

And Feliciano kissed him in thanks and expectation.

Ludwig was in the book the entire day, hours in one of the reading rooms, Feliciano in his own book as well, holding to each other's hand as they lost themselves in the stories the pages presented, relaxed and like time was now truly theirs.

Around the midafternoon, Ludwig and Feliciano joined the cooks in making a cake, a pink one with fruits and marshmallows that towered high. For their dinner, the dessert was imposing from its sitting in the table, none really eating all the food as they wanted an instant piece. There was enough for the whole castle to eat. Ludwig and Feliciano had enjoyed many pieces, had even brought along with them to their room to enjoy as Ludwig read.

"…they had saved the couple from the deep waters, not minding at all entangling in its current and soaking their traveling clothes," Ludwig read, resting on the floor, leaning his head to the bed, on either side of him Feliciano's naked legs as he instead took seating on the bed, taking constant bites of the cake pieces they had brought.

It was like Feliciano was keeping him caged to keep on reading the story and Ludwig did not mind, one arm wrapped around one leg, caressing sweetly. "They had lost time of the day to continue their traveling to Tokyo and so had found settling in an abandoned church along the way. They covered what they could to keep it warm, making a dazzling fire and hanging their clothes to dry from there. The sounds of the night worked well like lullabies, the air enchanting, beautiful, making their gazes between one another heated and wanting…" Ludwig suddenly halted, reading that part again, getting some wrong connotations from what was supposed to be a children's tale. Thinking perhaps just him jumping to conclusions, he continued.

"…their want for each other could not be held for much longer. They knew they had to act, especially in such a beautiful night, with just the air, just the romance they could succumb to, all their private wishes for once to be released the closer they came, the more their hands looked for more of their skin." Yes…this was happening. As he rummaged through the next pages of this particular story, Ludwig realized that what followed was a detailed telling of the two main characters' love making.

"Um…"

"Why did you stop?" Feliciano wondered, not at all perturbed, enjoying still from his cake. Ludwig wondered if he had even heard.

"Feliciano this is…uh…" how could he even word it?

"Come on, Ludwig, it's nothing we haven't heard or read ourselves."

"But these are…childhood heroes…having sex."

And Feliciano still shrugged. "These are from the Italian tales that were meant for adults. I had heard about it, just never actually…read it to truly see."

"You really…don't mind?"

“All natural thigs, Ludwig. Go on, I find parts like these to be beautiful and they’ll be lovely in your voice.”

Ludwig blushed, only getting more shaking.

“Don’t worry.” Feliciano leaned and placed a kiss on his head. “It’s just us. Think of it as part as any other story you’ve read till now.” He smiled in that accepting way that had Ludwig sighing and agreeing, making himself as comfortable between him as he had been for the night.

“…they kissed with that fire blazing behind them, its fuel heating more of their kiss, of the daringness to continue threading free skin.”

Feliciano hummed, loving indeed how the words coming from Ludwig’s mouth made him feel just as heated.

“Dietrich had for so long loved Irmhild’s legs, and what an honor it was to finally have them to his holding however he pleased, threading and taking to his wants.” It was in that exact moment that Ludwig took strong notice of the very pair of legs he found attracting himself, covering well both his sides of vision, now colored and glowing beautifully under the dim lighting of the room.

“He continued forward until he reached his center, drinking his glory, his shouts bringing heavenly glow into the church, more blessing than whatever ritual had long ago taken place.” Ludwig began a soft thread and scratch, his words and tone working an enchantment that had Feliciano slightly moaning. Ludwig smiled as he noticed what his words were doing, taking more embrace of those legs, letting his face lean and fall on them.

“He was above him, taking well the delicacy that laid under him, wanting to his ruling, for no one to dare to take from him and-” Ludwig had been persuaded by the color of Feliciano’s skin and the images in his head enough to fall to the temptation of a kiss. Feliciano hummed and swayed to the kisses placed, Ludwig letting the book close and fall to the ground uncaring. He turned to face both those legs in their entirety, kissing, licking all over them until he dared begin a soft thread up. He took the inner fullness and softness of his thighs, slightly biting, salivating it all in his owning, hands caressing their own way up, until they teased at the hem of his underwear, fingers escaping to take better hold of his backside, as velvet as his legs, pushing him more into his mouth, until he could kiss all his hips.

Feliciano moved wherever was necessary to give him more access, even letting those fingers begin the removal of the garment, kissing behind in its thread down his leg until it was off and he could focus back on his center, which he readily began to take into his mouth. It was surprising how daring he sucked and licked, like an experienced art, that familiar nervousness forgotten to pleasure his lover how he knew and could. To Feliciano, Ludwig’s mouth was already above the reach of great pleasure, his loud moans now decorating the room, letting himself fall to the bed slow, sometimes arching when Ludwig sucked just the right spot.

His mouth on his member was not enough, Ludwig wanted the taste of his stomach and sides, which he began to take, leaving an occasional bite that increased the strength of Feliciano’s

shouts. How he loved it, only making him bite harder, hands now caressing at his back, while Feliciano let his own hand traverse his own, as well as his hair and strong arms.

Further up Feliciano's chest Ludwig went, leaving the ground of the floor until his body joined Feliciano on the bed, on top of him as he decorated him whole in kisses. Feliciano could now wrap his arms around him, scratching, pulling, leaving his own kisses against Ludwig's head as he instead left them on his collarbone and neck. Ludwig reached Feliciano's mouth, a kiss heated and passionate that had them writhing across the sheets, always asking for more, driving themselves madden for each other, only a need for a breath enough to dispatch them, into a lock of eyes that kept them frozen in that moment.

Their want was clear, the moment of initiation there and in that silence it was decided, more assurance in the way Feliciano threaded his fingers gently across Ludwig's face.

"Do we…tonight?" Ludwig still wanted to question aloud.

"Yes…" Feliciano accepted so blissfully already.

"Are…are you sure? Are…you ready?" Ludwig was ever as nervous, but his want was stronger tonight.

"Definitely."

Ludwig could tell in the utter epitome of dream he represented, taking his face yet again to land him back on their kiss, on wild hands threading the necessary to heighten, to slowly remove articles to reveal more of their skin to small fires that glowed in the room.

Finally, there was a moment that their naked bodies laid against each other, an exhilarating enough that warmed them, painting them red and giving shivers of delight. Ludwig managed so Feliciano could have his head rested by their pillows, checking constantly they were both comfortable in the bed, his eyes and hands getting distracted and placing them once again to grab, to feel and soothe against that amazing skin that continued Feliciano's hums. Their groins rubbed deliciously together, that cradle of their hips electrifying, having them already grabbing to the sheets tightly as if dear life was hidden in their silk. But Ludwig wanted that depth, and Feliciano wanted him entirely inside him, needy and humming that request, words lost in the foggy haze of their passion. Ludwig could understand it though, letting one hand start a soft thread from his feet, down his legs, to his thighs, his ass, and finally his entrance, testing a single finger, a widening and wetting spell under his breath as he inserted, spinning softly, creating that needed space as well as louder moans and mewls from Feliciano's mouth. Delightful they were, having Ludwig smirking, testing to do so faster, harder, earning the roll of eyes, arch and screams that he wanted. He dared a second finger, trying the third, until he knew Feliciano was ready to take his own erection, yet he halted, he stared, to that last bits of virginal essence, shown more physically in the promise necklace that still Feliciano wore, the only item on his naked chest.

Despite how dark the room was, Feliciano shone still as reddish, orange and even rose as a sun, truly a beauty, a majesty worthy of being Queen and an Ace, and Ludwig felt so small, so human, but he was to dare at heaven, take it and enjoy from it as if he belonged to be a god as well. Feliciano breathed out, air in heat that tainted him in more colors of love and passion.

Ludwig could not remove his eyes as one hand traversed through the bedside table, scourging until he found a familiar red collar.

He remembered how Gilbert had given it to him shortly before they had left on the trip around the four kingdoms, to use if ever this very moment occurred. Ludwig to this day was surprised that it had survived all the countless of things that happened, to be able to wrap around perfect to that delectable neck, one that Ludwig reached to kiss as he angled his hips, tip where it should, body ready, hands gentle and kisses loving. They both enjoyed those kisses, not minding its lengths, its distractions for what was meant to happen next.

“Is it all right?” Ludwig was ever cautious.

“Mhm,” Feliciano nodded, with a slight tremble, one that didn’t make Ludwig so sure.

“Feliciano, are you really-”

“Yes, please, I am,” he was able to convince still, a devotion Ludwig could see clearly in his eyes, that raised his hips, took Feliciano’s hand tightly, laying them as comfortably as he could upon the bed.

“I-I’m going to, okay…”

Feliciano nodded once again and afterwards Ludwig began a smoothing push, both admitting soft, different, but the deeper Ludwig went, Feliciano’s soothing expression grimaced and groaned, away from singing moans. The immense pleasure that started surrounding Ludwig wasn’t worth seeing Feliciano like this. He was ready to depart, but Feliciano raised his hand and kept a strong hold on his shoulders, potent enough to even have his nails piercing the skin there, slowly raising his legs to wrap them around Ludwig.

“Do-don’t worry…please continue,” Feliciano wanted to push on. He kept telling himself that he was ready, that a little pain was not going to ruin it. He could take it.

Ever so careful and worried, Ludwig pushed on slow, hating how Feliciano proceeded to cringe, but he was following the demands of the pushes Feliciano managed with his legs, until Ludwig knew for sure that he was buried deliciously and fully inside him.

It was glorious, like truly engulfed in unimaginable heights, but through that cloudy haze of pleasure he could still see Feliciano’s pain, having to pull himself from this heaven, away from thrusting on like instinct and his want called for, but love and care for Feliciano showed stronger as he lay still, breathing heavily above him, gazing between one another as they let themselves be adjusted and discover. Oh, this was enough, this was fulfilling, amazing, Ludwig wrapping well around him, intermingling breaths and settling with that welcoming of their sex.

“Are…are you all right?” Ludwig managed to word somehow.

Feliciano could only nod, as the piercing passed, as ecstasy began to make its entrance, as light came, as Feliciano’s small groans turned into melodic moans.

“It-it’s, wonderful,” Feliciano breathed out in dream as it slowly turned into the bliss so many had spoken about. Oh, it was so much more than words, or tales, or even pictures. It was an union unlike any, as they said, becoming their one, their power, released in this air of grandeur pleasure.

“You…you can move now,” Feliciano sounded almost hypnotized.

“Are you…really-”

“Yes, I am, just please…” his legs tightened around him, bringing his hands to his back, caress as sweetly, a wonderful touch to add to their present union. “Let’s give in.”

The content, the adoration in his eyes and even the way his body relaxed to the pleasure was just enough for Ludwig, who began to pull, then, in a wonderful friction, in, his first thrust announced in a loud moan.

“More…” Feliciano asked, expecting the strengthening and speed of that fulfill. But Ludwig remained cautious, and despite the amazement and the continuing increase of dreaming haze in his mind, he began slow, with sweet caresses, kisses against Feliciano’s neck that assured him more that Feliciano’s moans were now of indeed deep pleasure.

As the assurance grew, he confided to give in to speed, to take more of those depths, relishing on the skin surrounding him, joining Feliciano in decorating the room in their sounds.

“More…” Feliciano begged more loudly, and this time, oh truly this time, did Ludwig let himself give fully in, harsh, with speed, force, all sparks of lighting and beautiful storms in their bed. It shook, it bounced with their force, all red, all shouts, their union ruling and giving more sparks of love to continue them in those thrusts, in wraps of arms, kisses, strong, wanting to keep that bliss, their heaven. Ludwig quickly learned to use well the strength presented in his body, it aiding to find a spot that had Feliciano losing sense of all the tangible around him.

Only but Ludwig, oh only Ludwig, taking in his all to something that was turning to his mightiest need. They repeated words of love, of makings of strength and speed, until that wanted forever had to reach a peak that they had to accept if even unwanted.

It exploded, it tainted magnificence, they fell harshly but ever so comfortable in their arms, in that comfort, Feliciano still keeping his legs strong around Ludwig’s waist, and Ludwig kept himself inside him, still relishing by knowing well that he was in his queen’s depths, taken for him, all for him, only for him, Ludwig repeating that claim in unintelligible words, kisses and even bites of showcase.

“I love you, I love you, I love you,” was their mantra, kisses continuing until exhaustion reached them, until they desired sleep, although wanting to remain in the sweat of what was their deepest passion, together, wraps well around them. Part of Ludwig wanted to hope he could keep himself inside him for all the night, to always keep them unified, hoping for new pleasures to easily pick up and start again. Comfort had won though, content in the naked press of their skin, their easy breaths as they settled into sleep, well into their crooks as continuation of their love making. Ecstasy it was even with eyes closed, in dreams.

Unnoticed went the change of Feliciano’s promise necklace, now red with a beautiful white floral design, uniting in the center to the usual heart of the kingdom.

The promise had been fulfilled, kissed then by the sudden entering of a single red rose petal.

Chapter 65

Chapter Notes

> There was a point I thought I would post this chapter within the same month of the last update, but a trip to Poland and a spontaneous one to the Netherlands changed that. I MANAGED THOUGH!!!
>
> … Also, WARNING: THIS CHAPTER HAS NSFW

There was a very…very perfumed aroma in the morning, gentle to their nostrils, not enough to awaken the two lovers still held well together after their first night of passion. They knew somehow something was covering them, soft, warming, but they confused it with the feel of their skin, not bothering on it until a rose petal blew right into Feliciano's nostrils, who then had to be awakened roughly in coughs until it was out. That's when he noticed…all the red rose petals, swarming around their bed, many covering the floors and even the furniture of their room. A path was coming from an opened window, Feliciano being reminded that they had left it open last night during their reading. Sure, it was rather beautiful, but very odd. Feliciano hadn't planted any roses in the balcony and Ludwig didn't inform him about doing so either. The tower where their room was located was high up, not enough to receive such a breeze of flowers from surely the ones in the garden or street sellers. Ludwig most have noticed the weight that moment, sitting up along Feliciano, all the petals that were on him cascading down to add more to a pile. He held the same curiosity as Feliciano as he gazed around him, then meeting his eyes with his queen again, hoping he could have an answer, but Feliciano was just as confused, shrugging and the question still strong in his eyes.

Petals swarmed around their still held hands, next to their naked bodies, the bed showing proof of the night before and they were reminded of heavenly lights and dream hazes of pleasure. The mess of petals was uncaring again, they wrapped their arms around each other as strongly, lost in their heated kiss, until they were laying down, Ludwig between Feliciano, their hands kept together holding them tight in the moment. The petals decorated the blush of their skin, as Ludwig kissed all of Feliciano's form, getting the same moans of the night. Feliciano's grasps were now stronger, more wanting and communicative. He managed to push Ludwig back into the bed, laying now in their bed of rose petals so he could sit upon him, controlling the amount of kisses, strength, even how they moved against the bed. They laughed between their kiss, at a new energy that they understood was meant for another round of love. They were excited, ready with knowledge, smirks and sensuality. Feliciano sat up, with a sway of his hips, an extend in his hands that was show enough for Ludwig to have to bite his lips so he wouldn't release an embarrassing moan, weakness to how easily Feliciano controlled him.

A loud laugh resounded well through the halls, potent enough to interrupt, both raised and surprised that such a sound could penetrate the walls of their room.

“The King and Queen have finally consummated! Congratulations on the sex you two!” Gilbert.

They managed to hear a loud slap afterwards, murmurs that Ludwig identified belonging to his mother, surely dragging her elder son out of whatever vicinity he took to them.

“Wha-what?” Feliciano wondered, feeling exposed, even raising a blanket from the bed to cover himself, worried that any could be watching.

Ludwig remembered the words told in that small lunch he shared with his family weeks ago.

The kingdom itself showed a symbol to their sexual beginnings and Ludwig assumed most had already witnessed it…but what could it be? That’s when he started thinking about…the red rose petals. Feliciano seemed to have come to the same realization, the heat gone as they instead scrambled to get something quick to wear, settling with blouse shirts and hesitantly making their way to the ajar balcony door. Feliciano dared to open, slowly, afraid, not sure what to expect. Ludwig placed a comforting hand on his shoulder, and with it came the push that got Feliciano to completely open.

The city shone in a much deeper red than usual, beautiful, especially with the new millions of roses that grew on buildings, on forgotten corner streets, statues, bridges, at the edge of the rivers, even on the train and carriages that passed. Children played in large piles of petals, lovers were handing large bouquets that didn’t fit well in their arms, they were being saved in special bottles, some cleaning them out of their pathways, bike riders happily enjoying from such a day where such an event only occurs with new reigns of kings and queens. There was surely more flourish in the mountains, some carriages heading out of the city to see it, to enjoy or collect.

What a sight indeed, what a blessing to witness, Ludwig and Feliciano couldn’t remove themselves from the balcony, frozen in their stare, even breathless. A strong scent was the only thing that got Ludwig to move, in search of its root until he looked below to the rest of the castle. He nudged Feliciano to give it sight as well, and Ludwig had to hold him, afraid Feliciano would jump off from the balcony in his curiosity and wonder.

Roses piled up from the base of the castle, reaching high and high in growing vines that surely arose quickly in the night. Some of them managed to reach the very height of their room, some continuing upward. Not a space was left free and Ludwig and Feliciano laughed as some of the inhabitants had a hard time just opening their windows and balconies. Others instead threw out piles and piles out of their windows. Some amazed, some annoyed.

They were expecting something much worst, but this, this was spectacular, like a natural ball, just a small token to a new side of passion that was surely gifted from the Aces. They spotted Pookie playing with many of the petals, adorable, for a moment distracting them, but their hands met again. Ludwig then noticed the change the promise necklace took, pointing, Feliciano gazing, but the surprise was quickly wash with awe at this new beauty.

So, the promise had been fulfilled and it was awarded in this new gem on Feliciano’s chest.

They turned to their eyes, to the still firing passions, and kissed at the very top with roses to spread and danced about with them.

They called it the Roseann spring, a natural bloom as old as the very first King and Queen. It was not only in Berlin that it was seen and celebrated, but across the whole kingdom, bringing forth joy, harvest and new items of soaps, oils and scents that Feliciano loved being brought to the castle to decorate the bathroom. He enjoyed some of the most splendid baths… forcing Ludwig to join him in the waters…to then be push back on its wall so Ludwig could thrust between him, water, along with anything that made it colored, falling at its edges and landing on places that weren't intended to. Familiar shouts, scratches, legs being wrapped around wide hips, would arise into the bathroom, in the usual.

After the King and Queen found discovery of showing their love through sex, they used of it constantly, not a day passing through without them having found a moment to shout and wrap themselves deeply. The place, the time, who could be near, what were the plans of the day, did not interrupt their occurrence, and so for the next couple of months, their coupling was a daily expectance. As the days went on, they experimented with different kinds of positions, sometimes ones that Ludwig or Feliciano would have thought about during the day… especially when they just came out from their power training. The nights were the test, the mornings it was ready, and they took full reign of it to drive them crazy in ecstasy. It was starting to become normal that they would miss their breakfast, sometimes hurrying down disheveled and with obvious proof through marks or their hair sticking out. The rest, especially with the universal alignment coming closer and closer, couldn't let them indulge in it for long and so it had come to the point that they would have to knock harshly on the door, demanding they stopped and continued their work. Abasi was the only one who dared do such thing, others, like many servants, were not so lucky even if they had tried.

One unlucky one, a maid who had been given the misfortune of getting them when it was almost time for Feliciano's harp lesson and Ludwig's sword lesson, had the embarrassing story of arriving and being able to hear the bed creak, their moans, their shouts, as clear as if they were in the very hall. She was about to place her hands upon the door to announce, when she heard the King's voice:

"Ah, Aces! I love it when you ride me!"

"Ah! Ah! Ah! I want to go harder, Luddy!"

"Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes!"

She had demanded to serve in another part of the castle afterwards.

Sometimes, down at the breakfast table, they would make games and bets as to who was going to get and interrupt the King and Queen, something that Ludwig and Feliciano later found out, going against it by stopping their morning rumps…or waking up earlier to get something before the day started…a feat to Feliciano. Another solution was installing a spell that alarmed the King and Queen if anyone was coming their direction, glowing in an orb they had placed on their bedside table. Depending, they would stop and quickly head to

change…or try to get their release as quick as possible, even if it meant they would be dazed and tumbling for their work and practice.

It didn't stop at just their room. One late night, as Ludwig was working hard on some documents concerning meek trade with the Diamond Kingdom, Feliciano had slipped into the room not standing to spend the night without him, after he had been just as busy with some strength and body training.

Was it unlawful? Was there some decree placed by the Aces themselves not allowing it? Ludwig and Feliciano didn't think deeply enough as to stop the King from laying his Queen on the desk of the King's study room and thrusting upon him with strength, speed and all the lovely forces that had been held by the papers that now scattered. They later left the room, pleasured…yet guilty over doing it in such a room of importance. Somehow, their way of making do was having Ludwig bend Feliciano over the Queen's desk in the Queen's study room and taking him from behind, powerful enough to get Feliciano's screams well throughout the tower, the desk scratching the floor to add to this odd symphony. In the process, they tore the carpet and to their embarrassment, had to tell a seamstress what had happened, who then proceeded to tell the entire castle, earning them scolds and giving them great feelings of shame.

So, they decided to hold themselves, to test if they could go well without making love at whatever opportunity, and it went awful. Dinners became uncomfortable, as they were silent most of it, gazing to each other with such intensity that it was like they were undressing each other right at the table. It only turned worst when they started eating their food with extended licks, with more a smack of their lips, all while they never turned away from the other.

Lovino have had it.

"Can you please listen to what I'm saying instead of giving each other disgusting bed eyes and only thinking about your assholes! There's a baby here!" He rocked little Augustino on his lap, who just laughed and asked with an extend of his hands for more zucchini pieces. Antonio was to say something about saying 'asshole' for all the table to hear, including their son, but sighed and accepted the fact that his son was well on his way to being a potty mouth himself.

They really tried, but many knew it wouldn't last as their bodies called for one another in deep intensities they couldn't refuse. Their calls of seduction were put into play. Feliciano had tempted Ludwig one night with the long silk robe Francis had given him and Ludwig had fulfilled his fantasy of having him in it, the fabric well wrapped around him as well as proof the next morning. Then there were the dances, Feliciano's last resort when Ludwig held himself strong, heavy in work and practice. Once Ludwig remembered being strong enough, simply turning around and walking away back when he was feigning hatred. But now… Feliciano was his husband…his…this time nothing stopped him from wrapping his arms around those sensuous hips, moving those rhythms against him, trying to go along with the dance which he could not join right to. Yet again that night was of passion, of moving their hips against one another in that dance, with drums of touch and kisses, smiling at their failure the next morning.

It came to the point that they thought they could bring their work to the bed, the books, scrolls and maps at their bedside table to take the moment they could. Sometimes Feliciano would add something in the morning before Ludwig would take him, turn him to lay on the bed and reign on him. Ludwig would practice dark incantations afterwards, many times failing as his mind was still in dazes that couldn't concentrate well. And so they tried to involve their very work during it, keeping maps and notes above their pillows or on their bodies as they moved and kissed.

"And so-" Ludwig gave a particular heavy thrust that had Feliciano dropping his pen to the bed, rolling his eyes from the parchment and moaning high his delight, "-we should use the Wiremu spell to cover ourselves well in the front." He dropped to place a kiss on Feliciano, as if declaring sure that decision.

"I-I-I don't know. I-I'm worried the soldiers won't be able to take-" a shout, Ludwig having rubbed his hands the perfect way down his hips, "-the spell. Is there a Heartian one or one from another kingdom?"

It was hard to know if Ludwig was really thinking about it. Sure, he was concentrated, but his thrusts became harsher, his hold on Feliciano tighter. Was he really thinking about war strategies or just drilling more into his queen?

"We-we could ask some of the other kings," Ludwig suggested as he sat up, letting Feliciano's legs rest on his shoulder as he continued to take those depths, Feliciano for a moment forgetting the names of the other Kings, what kingdom they reigned, what magic they knew could help.

"Oh Aces! Yes!"

"I'll get into contact with them when I can."

"I wasn't…that-" he bit his lip upon another well placed thrust and Ludwig's grab on his rear. "Oh, and, and-" It was hard to speak as he was taking, as his fingers busied scratching his back. "The back formation! The back formation! Have-have you settled on a point of exchange?"

It was amazing how Ludwig could continue to pleasure, still with steady interest to be able to pick up from one of the many maps on the near table, going along in his movements as he inspected, all while Feliciano continued to shout and enjoy. He kept the map over Feliciano's head, trying to find a good route, getting deeper, his hips in a position that could drive quicker, Feliciano with stars.

"Oh gods! Yes! There! There! Right there!"

"There? I don't know, Feliciano, I believe it would be too far for the Spadians."

"I'm not talking about that!" Ludwig looked down to remind himself. He smirked and for once moved the map aside to hit hose very areas that drove Feliciano even more insane in the pleasure.

“There…there…” he pointed.

“Yes! There it feels so good!” Ludwig rolled his eyes and focused on the wrapped warmth.

“No-No… I meant the map. There, through the Amazon in the Clubian kingdom.”

Ludwig stopped and interrupted to gaze at Feliciano’s pointed direction, agreeing it to be efficient…but he still wanted to do some studying before they could decide.

“I don’t believe…doing this while doing…this…would be best,” Ludwig decreed, just wanting to focus on loving Feliciano.

Feliciano agreed, wrapping his arms around him, pulling him down to him and both settled on finishing.

It took a while…a long while, actually, the remaining months, for Ludwig and Feliciano to settle from this Roseann Spring frenzy, to keep their minds away from sexual wants and focus more on their planning, on a war that was coming and gave a dreadful reminder every day as time passed and brought them closer to the alignment. Sure, they still enjoyed from their passionate throws and they were still as eager for it, but now it was more organized, in certain moments, away from their job as royalty. It had to do with the fact that they were stressing and worrying more, a clear countdown now as they reached the last month before the alignment. They learned that a single finger caressing down their bodies was sometimes enough to distract, to pleasure, to keep their love ever strengthening, passionate as when they were between their legs. It became more of that, of just gazing to one another and reminding of love, belief and sureness to defeat the coming evil.

A somberness was reaching the kingdoms though, dread piling and seeming to turn everything greyer. It was so hard to have hope when a nightmare was having its chances of coming so soon, reaching like a terrifying hand in the night. But the Kings, Queens and Jacks worked well to lighten it, to call, to shout of belief, mantras and songs that assured victory and future. They were getting more recruitments, the training grounds getting filled more and more with the speech from different people. Many reports came filling in from other kingdoms about progress, inventions and more plans to aid. It wasn’t just soldiers of all kinds, you also had the common folk who couldn’t fight planning their own home battles, ways of survival, practice, giving food, healing procedures, even stories of heroes, the other Aces and Augusta to lighten children or the overhearing fighter, giving them hopes that they would be part of those tales as well.

Feliciano began organizing feasts, festivals, balls, all kinds of events, occurring every weekend to keep that lively aura, to showcase what they have done and could continue to do. In some of these feasts, they would have soldiers parading the city, wizards showing magic and fierce incantations that were to be used in the war, along with weapons, uniforms. It helped to keep up exaltations, happiness and belief and so the castle did not mind preparing, nor did Ludwig, Feliciano and Kiku mind dressing in honor and attending, enjoying from it all along with their citizens.

Feliciano's very own birthday was celebrated in one of these, surrounded by soldiers in their medals and drinks being toasted with his name. It was rather simple compared to all the other balls they had made, the feast taking place in the small ball room, those present family, close friends and soldiers they met constantly.

The past King and Queen, having retired to the northern German islands, returned to celebrate as well as aid, along with Vincenzo and Renata, there ready to fight, with armors and swords to spare.

By now, it was only a matter of weeks, this celebration pinpointing something from the prophecies, how it was to be along Feliciano's twentieth birthday. It was odd for Feliciano to celebrate it so vividly, so happy, his family near, Ludwig with an arm around him, going on and chatting with many of the ones present, for a moment ignorant of threats of war.

"-and he did it again!"

"At this rate, we might as well be milking St. Marks." Another spree of boisterous laughs, Pookie flying along with them with question, which only got them to laugh more. Ludwig and Feliciano were a part of it, with their drinks and having just finished a dance that left them tired.

"I don't know about you guys, but that calls for another beer!" Gilbert shouted and they all joined along in getting what seemed their hundredth glass, away to an area where a barrel with a servant awaited them. Even Ludwig was eager, but Feliciano…held, standing in his place, looking hesitant.

Ludwig easily caught his dread. "Feliciano, are you all right?"

Feliciano didn't know how to respond, how to word it. "Should we really be…celebrating like this?"

"My dear, it's your birthday. It calls for it. We have been working and preparing so hard. We deserve to celebrate for the night."

"We…were so close, I can really…feel the stars taking their place." In that very moment he gazed forward to the sky as if he could see the very stars that symbolized it. More and more the nights looked like that of the ancient murals that foretold it.

"And were ready." Ludwig took both Feliciano's hands in that assurance. "We have read all the books, have learned about everything that could happen to us in an alignment. We'll be powerful. I'm sure we'll be able to defeat him." Ludwig showed well that belief, like an easy truth.

Feliciano smiled, for a moment sure. "I still feel…like so many things are going to go wrong."

"You are only nervous. You will prove yourself well and it will all be resolved. We'll be back in the castle living our normal reigns before you know it."

Still, Feliciano was not showing that promise.

Ludwig sighed, “how about I make us that cream liquor you really like?”

Feliciano finally shone. “Will you make a little heart and then add cocoa powder?” Feliciano flourished his eyes like a child.

“Lieben, of course.”

Feliciano rewarded him with a deep kiss, a strong embrace, enough to take away whatever darkness in his mind. “I’ll go get the liquor!”

“I’ll join you.”

“No! Stay here and get everything else. I’ll be quick!”

“Do you know where to look for it by yourself? It’s in the cellar of the King’s study room.”

“Ludwig, I’ve been there several times, I know.” Something that Feliciano shouldn’t be doing really, but Ludwig had learned to not mind, only smirking as he rolled his eyes and let his husband head off, of course expecting and watching.

Everybody was occupied in the ball, the halls of the rest of the castle rather desolate as Feliciano made his way hurriedly down them. Luckily the King’s study room was relatively near to this ballroom, Feliciano making his reach comfortably, the only difficulty being to move a heavy wardrobe so he could make his way down to the cellars in that room, deep, moist, dark with only but a couple of flickering torches. He had been there so often he had forgotten about his great fears at the beginning or indeed how tremulous everything was. He had learned to keep a whistle, a joyous song along with a skip that seemed to paint the walls in all the colors he wished he could give them. The bottles of fine alcohol where kept at the deepest floor, far into its depths, placed in a nicely decorated shelf that to Feliciano was art, always taking some time to admire its carvings, exploring for bottles as old as the past century, before finally settling on the bottle he was supposed to get. Ah yes, the ten-year-old one with-

…a sudden red in his hand took his attention. Perhaps a sort of inflammation, perhaps a scratch, a bruise from his last training, but the closer he looked, the more light slowly reflected on it and it began to look more and more like a ruby.

No…no…it couldn’t be.

He reached his hands to feel it, hoping it to just be a trick of the light, but there it was, hard as the stone it was, an edge of gold beginning to appear to him.

He paled, for a moment everything spun, his breath was already leaving him and perhaps he would meet next with the ground. It only worsened when he noticed that there was a second one in his other hand, a symbol clear of what he was to expect, taught well in his family as it was well common.

The more detail he took, as the red vines that were ever so slow beginning to grow from both the rubies' edges, the more he fretted, shook, his thoughts in a whirl with clear panic shinning in his eyes.

No, no, no, no, no, no, he kept in repetition, now wheezing, many worries and concerns all shown plain in his sight instead of the cellar hall.

The war, Khaos, the alignment, how it could affect him, Ludwig and now…

The dangers, the disasters, the pain, violence, blood, deaths…and he was to be…

No-no…he-he could be wrong! Perhaps this really wasn't what he thought it was. There had to be an explanation, something else other than the only idea he was ever taught it could be.

He was frantic, spinning, looking for an immediate exit to it all.

"Kandake!" He shouted, as if it could make her appear that instant, rushing up and forgetting the liquor he was intended to get in the first place.

He needed this to be clear, he needed to be sure. This had the potential to change everything.

Chapter 66

Chapter Notes

> I edited this chapter in one sitting because I felt so bad I hadn't posted anything for so long…and not writing at all the past two weeks with several things going on. Finally managed some time though! I hope you enjoy this chapter!

"It's very clear, your majesty. You are bearing." It was only obvious, but Feliciano had been hoping that he wouldn't hear those words, Kandake still thoroughly examining the two jewels in his hand. "And you are to bring twins. Right now, I cannot tell the genders, but in three months time it shall be possible." She kept herself well, elegant and strong, as if she was giving the news to any happy expecting parent at any other stable time. Feliciano couldn't keep that, he fell, he whimpered, tears decorated him well, choking and reddening him more into a mess in Kandake's vision.

"Your majesty…I don't know what I should tell you," she was still as composed, afraid that her nearing, her touch, could only crumble him more.

"I-I don't know what I want to hear right now," he managed to say between sobs.

Against whatever commands to keep herself apart, to let him deal with the news as he wished, she leaned and brought for once comforting hands, bringing him to her, to release whatever emotions needed to be shown, or even worded.

"Feliciano…this is something to celebrate. You are to bring forth heirs, two children as Augusta had done. I'm sure the kingdom will feast and be with higher spirits," she tried to elate.

"How could I? This is the worst possible moment!" He gripped harsher on her dress, pulling her more to him, having to lay on the ground along with him. "There is a war coming, a horrible war…Ludwig, I and the rest of the Kings, Queens and Jacks are risking so much. I'm not sure if we'll all survive, if everything will work. No matter what happens, I'm sure there will be devastation and horrors… that is not the world I want to bring my children into. This is not how I planned to start a big family."

"You have from eight to ten months for the children to come."

"And what could happen from here to then? What if something happens to me? What if the alignment does something to them? I don't know in what kind of state I can bring them into. Khaos could use them to his advantage. It's another worry, it's my children I have to look to now, that I have to protect this world for and what if I can't, what if I can't!" He filled well

the room in misery, Kandake feeling ashamed that she could only but soothe a hand against his back.

“It is but feelings to add, it is yet another thing to fight for. You are a powerful being, Feliciano. I doubt you would let anything happen to your children. I know you will protect them well, and if even if you are bearing during this process, I don’t believe it will hinder much of what you are to do or what you can do.” She now spread her fingers through his hair, just the spot to slowly calm, for his shaking to lessen and for the sobs to become more like whispers. “They, along with an entire world, will look up to you and they can serve you as more leverage for victory. Don’t let this stop you from believing in a future, let it remind you of the world you want to fight and create for them. I’m sure you will be capable.”

Even if reddened and still drowning in tears, bright brown eyes showed themselves once again to the room, a shine of belief in this sudden storm.

“I know it’s difficult, but you have to try and be strong. You have to keep your head up.”

Feliciano sat up, letting the words work their caress. “…this is all so difficult…”

“You are Queen, it is never to be a simple task.”

“Indeed…” at least by now the red had smoothened, the tears had dwindled, and his breath had even.

Yes, being Queen was an unrest of occurrences that he always had to deal with at first hand. This was but another, one of highly importance that depended heavily well on him. At least…

“…you have the decision. It is in your power,” Kandake reminded and it made Feliciano react and decree.

Even in his turmoil, he stood and headed to one of the drawers, rummaging.

“What are you going to do?” Kandake stood, hoping to understand.

“Hide it.”

“Hide that you are bearing?” Kandake was indignant. It was such a big thing, large enough to shaken all the kingdoms, and Feliciano thought of just…containing it.

“Yes! Please, I beg of you, Kandake, don’t tell absolutely anyone about this until I deem it safe.” He managed to find some old white ribbons.

“You might be risking that safety if you hide it.”

“No, I’m only trying to protect us, as well as these children by doing so. If we were to tell anyone, word would easily spread and with Khaos’s spies about, I’m sure he would find out and threaten them specifically knowing they are heirs and thinking me to be weaker because of this.”

Kandake sighed, but agreed. “Are you at least going to tell Ludwig?”

The silence Feliciano took as he wrapped the ribbon against the jewels and growing symbols made Kandake fret.

“No…” she could already tell.

“There’s a lot of things on his mind right now, I can’t add this to it.”

“It’s his children as well. He could get excited, he could help you.”

“Or he could panic, worsen…even lock me down in the castle…that’s what Romulus did…”

“He holds Romulus’s soul, but it does not mean he will do things exactly as he had done. You’re not entirely sure.”

“I rather not see how. He will just have to remain unknown to it like the rest.”

It hurt, it pained, as if the very new jewels were causing it. He still caressed them sweetly through the bandage, the first show of love and dear acceptance.

They were to have heirs…two heirs! Oh, he knew that in other circumstances they would have jumped, embraced, kissed, announced with sheer joy to the whole kingdom.

He sighed…perhaps…if this would one day be over, that celebration could come, but for now, Feliciano had to settle with the idea by himself.

“…how could I let this happen?”

“Weren’t you wearing the red collar?”

“At the beginning…but then it was so wonderful we…must have forgotten at some point about it…” he slumped, blamed and with the new weigh looking well on his shoulders.

Kandake gave a small chuckle, “it truly couldn’t be avoided.”

They remained in the silenced room for minutes on, Kandake wanting to provide any other comfort she could, while Feliciano was hesitant to even leave, knowing he had to begin lies and drive away questions and curiosities…in ways that he was still thinking over on how to do.

For the night, even the next day, Feliciano avoided Ludwig, still thinking excuses, plotting, not sure which of the many could work. He was so terrified that he could tell, that he could see pass the ribbons, that vines could grow to places that were visible. There were still other jewels that were to appear, and he was fearful that they could show before their expected time. He shivered at anyone passing, his greets weak and showing well his tremors, even as he tried to hide it all with his smile. Hoping for some time to relax from questioning eyes falling down on his bandaged hands, he tried to catch a breath in his own room, perhaps take a nap before heading down to dinner.

“Feliciano!” He found his beloved shouting at him instead, hurriedly coming to him with deep worry, taking his arms, eyeing him completely. “Where did you go last night? You never came back to the ball, not even our room! I was desperately looking for you.”

Feliciano was already petrified, not a word to spare or a movement to speak. “I-I-I…” nothing, none of the millions of excuses he had concocted arose to save him, showing a fear that only made Ludwig fret the more.

“What happened? Are you all right?” Ludwig pulled him closer, then noticing the bandages. “Why-”

“I fell!” Feliciano pulled them back before he could stare longer. “I…fell in the cellar and…I broke the bottle I was supposed to bring and well…my hands fell on the pieces,” he laughed sheepishly as he showed the wrapping. “Kandake was near and she helped me to recover and she…suggested I stayed with her to really heal and well…I was embarrassed to tell you what happened and I didn’t…want to disappoint you coming without the bottle.”

Ludwig sighed, his hold now relaxed, but still keeping him. “I really do not mind, Feliciano. I just wanted to know you were okay.” He pulled him to his chest and for once Feliciano could be smoothened, to forget about all kinds of worries and focus on this protective softness, this energy and this lull that kept him with a deep smile.

Ludwig sighed, “just…next time, please send a messenger to let me know what’s going on at least. I’m panicking a lot lately and I don’t want to add more troubles.” He turned unknowing to yet another, to Feliciano frowning and greying, keeping his hands together on his back as if to keep it even more hidden.

“Yeah…” he answered, still standing in his place unsure now on what to do.

Ludwig went back to his scrolls and books, surely on infantry and numbers, in a comfortable corner of the room, surely to be well focused and concentrated. He took his pen, a chart and was about to scribble away, until he noticed that Feliciano was still standing in the same place.

“Feliciano…are you sure you’re all right?” He wouldn’t be able to work if Feliciano didn’t show himself well.

“Uh…yes, yes, I’m fine…it, just hurts a little bit still,” he smiled and began to come close.

“Hm…how about some rest? I’ll be here and I’ll try not to make too much noise either.”

“It’s okay.” Feliciano took siting right next to Ludwig, laying to him, comfortable, finally content. Ludwig smiled at the beauty and managed to continue his work between, being careful to not make movements that could startle his husband.

Feliciano let himself rest on that build, trying to forgot, trying to ignore the coming troubles and that he was carrying the future heirs of their families.

Days went on, the alignment but a matter of weeks away. The preparations became more straining, soldiers shouting well into the late night, wizards coating these dark nights in their powerful magic, even the very royals who were now beginning to be allowed to showcase all they could perform. Feliciano had one day managed to create a shield around all the limits of Berlin, it was beautiful, incrusted even with design as Feliciano refused to leave it so plain. It was strong enough to withstand all kinds of cannon fires and even Ludwig's best dark spell. Feliciano hoped it could well work for whatever the war concurred.

The days, despite how some of them were full of sun and blue skies, still felt darkened and evil, the city becoming more quite to the point that it had Feliciano wondering if there were even people inhabiting those splendorous buildings and towers, still shinning beautifully. He wished he could paint it all now, he wished all he could do was sketch, line, try out those pastels, watercolor…maybe even make a new fresco somewhere in the castle, but even now, sitting at one of the many large balconies of the castle, he was supposed to be working on some plans Ivan and him had concerning the first releases of Khaos from the confinement. It pained that he hadn't been able to create something upon a surface the last weeks, it hurt that he couldn't go out into the city, that he was spending less and less time with Ludwig, that he…

He looked down to the bandaged still well wrapped around him, Pookie taking rest on his shoulder, surely protecting what was hidden.

It hadn't grown much luckily, only a couple of leaves to decorate the vines that grew, enough to only keep the hands covered. And that was another thing that hurt…that he still had to keep it secret, that he couldn't do anything to prepare for the coming twins as it will arise suspicion, no matter how truly excited he was to begin decorating a room, getting presents, thinking names and plans as to their future daily care. He would daydream beautiful reactions from Ludwig…but have nightmares of Ludwig feeling betrayed and lied. It was more tears to his agitations.

"Your majesty," Kandake entered, smooth, silent and careful, taking a watchful sitting on the chair beside him, trying to find what exactly Feliciano could be staring into in the scape of Berlin.

"May I see?" She talked about the marks, Feliciano nodding and unraveling, showing only the usual. Kandake still took her inspection, smiling and then letting Feliciano quickly put it back before any other could notice about the halls.

"It still looks like they will be healthy." Wonderful news, but Feliciano couldn't find to show it, only humming, the only joy being the soothing touch he gave the bandages.

Silence continued between them, Kandake letting every thought Feliciano had rampage in his mind, surely damaging. "Your majesty…as a dear friend, you can word whatever is on your mind. I am willing to listen," she opened.

Feliciano yet remained in that somberness, the only hold he had on the jewels. "So much… there's just so much." He let out a deep breath up into the sky, as if it could take all his thoughts away as well.

“In just three days we will be settling to the Club Kingdom, stay near the confinement…to try and hold Khaos there for when the alignment comes.” There were big plans, numerous soldiers and magicians from all the kingdoms were to come, surely the stronghold to do well, yet Feliciano shook. “The alignment is only but a couple of weeks away as well and despite how much Ludwig and I have prepared ourselves for it, I still feel like it isn’t enough.” With each word he only brought more sorrow. “The writings don’t mention what could happen if one is bearing and I’m…” he looked deeply to the bandages, as if he could already hold those babies in his hands “…so worried about them. I’m terrified the alignment can do something drastic,” his voice trembled.

“I doubt it’s something to worry about.”

“But we don’t know!”

“I’m sure you will have control. It’s what you need for this whole situation. Remember you have the main decisions, and if you can keep it together and focus on winning, I’m sure that will be the outcome. These worries shall soon pass, but for now it’s important you do well to maintain that order.”

Feliciano sighed, for once relieved and with a touch of calmness. “And…if it does pass… what then?”

“You can focus on bringing your children, reconstruction, continuing on with a needed new order for a new world.”

“…if I even stay afterwards…”

“What do you mean?”

“The prophecies say that if I defeat Khaos…I take my place as the new Ace of Hearts.”

It was a large detail many tended to forget about, Kandake herself included. It had never happened before, nothing left writings for as to explain or prepare. They didn’t even know how exactly it would occur, how Feliciano would establish himself in the heavens or how he would even change. What about the Hearts Kingdom? Will it then be left without a Queen? Was he simply to leave and take a new job? What about the life he led in this world? What about his family? His friends? What about…Ludwig? What about…his coming twins? Was he to just leave them behind? Live on an eternity knowing he hadn’t spent time with the people that mattered the most to him. It was one of the many things that haunted Feliciano in that aspect. He worded these very questions and worries to Kandake, who could only nod and leave Feliciano to ponder those answers. She knew well to not mess with the decided orders of the Aces, even if it was going against Feliciano’s wishes.

“We will all see in due time,” was all she could say, knowing that it was disappointing, and it wasn’t helping at all with any kind of new ease to her friend. Feliciano had learned to sigh to it all, to try and find a smile, a beauty, one being the very scene presented, and so he started a new conversation of the landmarks they could clearly see, thoughts away from a fearing future.

They were to leave the city in a big parade, with all their numbers, weapons, items and absolutely everything to hold against Khaos. The festivity in the city was as bright and flourishing as the day of coronation, a different tone from those of fear in the last few days. Feliciano did well to remember, to excite, to jump, to dance about the halls as the celebration his people made. He had to be as believing as they were.

For today, he wore gloves, ceremonious and with beautiful white diamonds to shine like the crown they were told to wear. Luckily nobody questioned as they thought he just wore them for the farewell. Just in case, the bandages were underneath, still excusing that the healing was taking too long, that the cut had been too deep.

A large array of their army headed off through the city first, the royals meant to be the very tail. With the numbers, it would take a while before Kiku, Ludwig and Feliciano could head off. They used this residing time to wish farewell to little Augustino, who would be one of the few of the family staying behind.

“I assure you, Lovino, he will be well taken care of. These caretakers are the best in the castle,” Feliciano made sure to his brother, who still kept a tight hold of his son, wanting to hold for as long as he could.

They didn’t know how things could turn out, what they would see or how they could come back. Antonio and Lovino wanted to enjoy being together whole, sweet and plentiful without the rages of what was to occur.

“We…don’t know what’s coming, or even…how long we can be away, I’m just going to miss him and I…worry so…”

Feliciano had never seen his older brother so meek, unsure and faltering.

“You could always stay,” Renata suggested, done herself ready in uniform and elegance.

“I will fight along with my people.” There was his perseverance and strength like the very parade.

“I assure you, your son will be waiting here for your return and his smile and embrace would be your prize of victory,” Aldrich stood as quite a shield, even as he was meant to stay behind in the castle, his condition not the best to partake and fight.

Lovino sighed, calmed, a rare image to see him willingly hold out something so dear, his son, to others without a word of insult or complain. “Please…protect him, do all I have written and let him know how you can that both his parents love him and that they will come back.”

“I promise you, sir,” the caretaker bowed sure.

“The sun infantry is heading out. Antonio, Lovino, come quickly,” Vincenzo came to announce, being part of that very group himself. And these were their last steps, their last farewells, heading off with waves and Lovino with a tremble of tears. Antonio kept a hold on

him, assuring and promising…even if he was in the same shaken state, turning and already wishing back the shine of his son.

Renata and Feliciano settled then instead to play with the boy, to ail him as he had extended a call to have his parents back. Feliciano held him the longest, twirling, throwing him in the air, nuzzling or showing him the show of flags and colors that swayed as they headed out of the castle grounds.

“It’s all exciting right now,” Renata commented.

Feliciano sighed, “only for now.” To keep himself from frowning, he cuddled closer to his nephew. Renata joined, wrapping well around them, Feliciano happily sharing cuddles with her too.

“Mamma, being honest…I would prefer you not coming.” Renata raised and showed her resistance, ready to fight despite her son’s words. “You could always stay safe here, and with Augustino.”

With the sigh and the look she gave to her grandson, it seemed like a large temptation. “I’m sorry, Feliciano…but I have to fight too. The kingdom needs everything it can give and…” she then caressed the side of his face sweetly, with identical smiles and care in their eyes, “… I have to be there for you. I have to try and protect you too.”

“Mamma, I am capable. I will be protecting you,” he held her hands in promise.

“Mio bambino…how you’ve grown.” She kissed his head sweetly, the messengers calling: “The dream infantry!”

Renata sighed, knowing it was her leave. She held Augustino tight to her one last time before she left him with Feliciano, then making her way, many giving her respectful bows as if she was another queen. Ludwig came nearer, having finished chatting with his family, noticing the fearful stare Feliciano kept on their moving armies, yet his hold soothing to his nephew.

“We are to part soon ourselves,” Ludwig reminded.

Feliciano hummed, seeming to ignore his answer, only holding Augustino close, placing kisses and words of promise. The little boy had grown accepting, laying well down on his uncle’s shoulder to really fret.

“The Heartian Royal Infantry!” Came the call and that was the castle’s turn to move, all in the high entrance steps of the palace standing ad beginning their synchronized march. They fled out rather beautifully, with long robes, flowers and even drums to match along their steps.

Feliciano’s heartbeat quickened, his breathing hitched and he was ready to scream for all of this to stop. The caretakers came to pick up Augustino from his arms, the little boy fretting and crying. Feliciano couldn’t call back for him or even see it as they instantly went into the castle, now being left behind in a mess of men and women moving. Kiku headed off, one of the guards had to push him forward and he was separated from Ludwig.

“Amore…Amore!” He called desperately, trying to move about the crowd away from the order he was told he should have as they moved across the city. His horse and carriage was waiting, but he avoided them in desperate search for his King.

“Schatz!” And there was a grasp on his arm, endearing and knowing, Feliciano turned to him and embraced him tight, as if they hadn’t been standing together just moments ago. Feliciano cuddled and remained well in him, both ignoring scolds and movements in favor of their arms.

“Ludwig…I could almost just stay,” he admitted. “…I’m…very scared.”

Ludwig held him tighter, kissing his head and rubbing well his sides. “I’m terrified also. But remember that you are Queen as I am King. You are an Ace with incredible power and I’m sure you will prove yourself just the immensity the world has seen you in and we have prepared ourselves for. I’ll be with you…always and together we’ll defeat Khaos.” There was promise in those words that Feliciano could look up to, smiling, with an immense stature of pride that was ready to head off. He was still shaking though. His feet will surely stumble, and he didn’t even think he could walk truly through the whole city.

“Could you…hold me the entire time?” He asked his husband.

They weren’t supposed to, they were supposed to stand proudly on their own and they were heavily suggested to not have any kind of contact through the parade. Part of Ludwig wanted to remain obedient, but the part that held his love for Feliciano was stronger. He smirked, he had learned well to make off with the rules the last few years, something that Feliciano taught him, and he never thought would be for the best. Ignorant to the glares of planners and the stricter guards and soldiers, Ludwig took Feliciano’s arm well in his, patting and even kissing the gloved hand. Feliciano reddened, finding sweet the kiss he gave already to his future children unknowingly.

And so they began their stroll held together, looking to no one but themselves, engaged in normal conversation as if they were in any comfort the castle could give. Occasionally they would wave to the crowds as they passed the streets, being thrown flowers and gifts that they later organized well in their given carriage.

Things settled once they left Berlin behind, in front of them a large caravan of either carriages or walking men and women heading with them to the Club Kingdom, ready for war, ready to meet an atrocity that threatened to destroy their world.

Chapter 67

Chapter Notes

> I seriously thought I could update in the same month…but noooooo!!! I still try! I hope you enjoy this chapter!

It took many days for the royal infantry to arrive at the edges of the protected field, behind other Heartian infantries that made it there quicker. Along the way, they would meet with other infantries of other kingdoms. Décor in their movements, with their unique colors and greetings that made Feliciano joyous to meet and wave as they passed.

The small buildings of the village of Tiksi were unnoticeable to all, the humble places covered by the great amounts of tents that piled, the soldiers marching, cooks swinging about many kinds of different dishes, swords, spears, wands, an occasional sparks that flung to the air in a beautiful spectacle. They had brought the population of all the four capitals combined, surely even more, encircling well the forest around the field making it shine almost like its own very city.

Ludwig and Feliciano constantly kept a hold to each other, worried that they would easily loose themselves between the array. They kept to the few places that remained from the village, where all the royals from all kingdoms were located with their own guards, rooms, and spaces for necessary planning. Only the guards who had originally lived here vacated the area offering protection for the royals, their own families well sent to other cities where they could be safe.

Their schedules here consisted of going over the plans and making sure many times that everything was placed as it should be, repeated to the point that it was getting agitating, Alfred wording it well one evening, mad to the point that they had to call a break to relax and breathe. Ludwig and Feliciano appreciated it, enjoying from this time to sit by their room, impossible to take naps as they wished when they kept their eyes distant on the white snowy skies, expecting the field to splendor as it did the last time they were there. Abasi later explained to them that with the last orbs still considered newly placed, it was powerful and so they shouldn’t fear over flashes keeping them up at night.

Well, they really didn’t need them to keep up at night, simply the days counting down was enough to have their eyes staring to the ceiling, Ludwig and Feliciano chatting on about different art techniques which they would later test on whatever surface they could find to draw away their anxiousness. Or there was passion.

Some nights, Ludwig would wrap himself well around Feliciano’s waist, kissing from his neck down, moans as an accept to all, to being between one another and letting the bed cringe

at their movements, at their breaths and actions creating humidity in the room, eyes glowing in love and enjoy.

They had to cherish this, they had to give in to these delights, one of the many that kept them held, kept them loved and warm in such cold fears.

Even done, with its peak finished, Ludwig would remain within Feliciano, breathing him well in, despite the sweat, clinging to him more, his large arms taking more of his frame to himself. Feliciano accepted, blissful, with a deep smile and sweet caresses over whatever part of Ludwig's skin he could reach. The only thing Ludwig found odd…was that Feliciano kept the bandages from a wound he had received many weeks ago. With their nurses and quick healing, it should have lessened, or the bandages completely gone.

He noticed how Feliciano tensed when he went to pick the wrapped hand. "How bad a cut was this?"

"I…had half a bottle stuck in there," Feliciano made up, feigning a pain.

"Are your hands really all right?"

"Yes, they'll be fine to use. The cut is… still too bad and I'm really worried I might get an infection."

Ludwig let it fall gently to the side of the bed, settling his head on Feliciano's chest, his heartbeat his melody and his body his comfort.

They constantly received visitors at their cabin, sometimes soldiers and casters who were curious to see or perhaps meet them, or good friends they had made in their journey across the kingdoms. Feliciano even started organizing a special lunch just for the queens, a space he made to keep them away from tension and discuss their dealings with the position and other advices that could help for any ruling situation. Sometimes they were joined by the other kings, or as today, they were joined by a band of Oralee sailors who brought with them a special green tea from the Spadian islands, exquisite and with a scent that was good rest to their minds.

"My family owns one of the biggest plantations in the Oralee," Carlos told proudly.

"And it's the best!" Anthone assured, his family worked on the land as well.

"It helps all the muscles in your body to breathe and to clean of whatever bacteria still inhabiting our bodies," Nadia informed.

"Ah, it's so exquisite!" Elizabeta sighed with outmost peace, leaning more on her chair.

"I definitely will order crates for when we come back," Arthur dreamed.

"As will I," Lili held her cup as if it was a dear child.

Feliciano nodded with a smile, in it acceptance to the ordering. Something else to keep him expectant for a shining future.

“I’m sure we’ll have enough to go through with demands,” Carlos was confident.

“We’re going to be rich!” Emmanuel already celebrated.

“I’m going to get a bigger canoe! And with diamonds in it!” Rosangeliz proclaimed, earning laughter.

It was in such peace that it happened.

There was a sudden crack, loud…intimidating in this waiting expanse. For a moment they though it could perhaps only be a creak of their tables or chairs, perhaps another tent…but with the curious eyes all around them searching, it didn’t seem to be the case. The crack was coming from far…far into the field. As it continued, slowly driving the armies into nervous silence, Feliciano began to realize what that crack sounded like. It was like when Ludwig had tried to break the field with his sword.

“No…” Feliciano stood, anxiousness quickly reigning with him as it did with everyone that was there in his cabin terrace. He walked down, joining the rest of the crowds that stared in fearful silence to the distant sky…where the transparent wall of the field was supposed to be.

It continued coming stronger, the echoes going further than their camp, with in-betweens of silence that only agitated them all the more. Feliciano noticed as many began to place hands on their weapons, magicians already forming casts, yet their glances kept to the sky… expecting.

“Feliciano!” Ludwig called, rushing to his side, taking each other, in their eyes shaking fear, realization haunting and driving their hold tighter.

“It…it cannot be…” Elizabeta said as she neared them, joined along with the other royals, as disturbed.

“Is Khaos…breaking out?” Arthur worded what all that were present were surely thinking and talking about.

“No… it’s not supposed to happen yet…” Lili feared, wrapping herself around her brother, Vash’s staff standing and ready.

“There are still days left to the alignment,” Ivan reminded.

“Unless…he found something out…” Alfred was just as suddenly agitated as everyone else, his new gun brought out and shinning well in sapphires.

The cracks, the echoes, the bangs, intensified across, wanting to come to a finite, and the longer it went, the more the armies surrounding them formed more into the planned defense and attack.

It stopped, the last echo bringing a blanket of silence, none wanting to dare and test it, afraid that it could curse and bring about something. As the silence was elongated, many began to think that perhaps it was different, perhaps it wasn’t their worst of their thoughts, maybe a spell casted from the other side of the camp or just a random noise from the field…but then

there was actual shattering. They saw as rains of crystal came down, along with a roar of thunder and an act of lightning.

“No…” Feliciano panicked and shook, acting quick, leaving Ludwig’s side and running off forward, to a familiar opening through the trees that he had taken but a year ago, to dangers and openings far worse than they had been before.

“Feliciano!” Ludwig called, running after, into the very threshold, trying to find him in the scattering that began.

“Start your defensive shields!” A Spadian general commanded, loud in the vicinity, a chain of other lieutenants and captains spreading the word until every single soldier placed a specific hand gesture to their chest, to a seal they had been given. They all glowed in their respective kingdom color as an energy spread through them creating that magical defense, blind to others as they all began to take practiced positions.

“Move forward in the curved approach. Do not attack unless given royal command to start!” Elizabeta shouted, the message then spreading and thus their design instantly taking life, like living sun rays to the center of the field.

The royals, together, but two lovers who had already taken the depths, ran to their duty to the head of it all, moving between the insanity, branded in armors, uniforms and their chosen weapon as beginning force. All ten took to the trees, following the prophesied two.

“Move in! Remember that the St. Mark will give us a sign to see if we cannot hear!” João called as one of the leading members of an infantry. Pookie flew to him, nodding to all that he shall act when ready. He turned to the trees, spotting his master far, taking direction towards him ready to protect. They all saw charmingly as he spun and transformed to his large and ferocious form, quite a beauty to spark belief and power, diving forward, ready to begin.

The armies began their own plunge into the forest, with shouts and roars that replaced the echoes of shattering in the valley.

What was usually a long thread, Feliciano had rushed himself quick enough to be able to reach the very edge in a matter of a few minutes. There was the blankness he had remembered…indeed the same…and nothing else. There was no other men, no other roars but of his own people, who still hadn’t reached, leaving him alone to search, to find darkness out of its confide. He reached a hand to test if the field was truly gone and indeed his hand could go on and on, forward to the fortress of mountains, a blizzard now freer to expand.

Then where was Khaos? Where was the start of menace?

He began a pace around the field, hoping to find the placement of the orbs, hoping to fix it. It only took a single further glance, and he could already see it sprung, smoke rising, and pieces spread. There was someone, leaning to one of the surviving large pillars, an item on his hand that he kept throwing into the air and letting it fall back in his hand, calmed and nonchalant to what was coming. As Feliciano came closer, the features began to be more visible, a

familiarity that began to be terrorizing, and yet Feliciano managed to push himself, wanting to face, wanting, if he could, defeat that second.

“Ah, Feliciano, so nice to see you again! That cape looks rather divine on you,” Khaos complimented, with a smile and starting a stride forward that to anyone could be friendly, but Feliciano knew, stunned and shaking.

He couldn’t do anything, not even a word or scream as Khaos took sitting in a broken pillar he brought forward, collected as if this was a sitting at a park. Khaos waited with a smirk and Feliciano remained in the same standing he had met him in. The shouts of the people well sang around the field even if they couldn’t see them, yet Khaos remained unfazed about them, only staring at Feliciano, who began a clenching of his hands, hoping for magic, hoping for a sort of guidance that could give him the lead to attack.

“So?” Khaos was getting slightly impatient at not being responded to.

“What are you doing here?”

Khaos was rather astounded at this very direct question and response. “Can I not be here?”

“No…you’re not supposed to.”

“Technically I’m still in the field.”

“No…” Feliciano raised a trembling hand, pointing, knowing exactly where the field was supposed to start and end, Khaos sitting right well between it. “You are not.” An anger began to light up in Feliciano, like fire, like power, a spark that was so much like Augusta and Khaos responded as nonchalant, like a joke, like he was still facing a mere child. He did well to imagine that very infant Augusta he had known. Innocent, unknowing, weak and easy to manipulate.

Khaos stood in demand and fear, a standing he had remembered taking well to scold Augusta in, coming forward, even leaning slightly to be at Feliciano’s level, close to see tinges of fear in the Queen of Hearts, in those lovely colors that made him vibrant and beautiful. Khaos brought forward a clenched hand, dropping an item that Feliciano caught quickly, feeling a dark stone, clean and smoothed despite all the evil harbored in it. The color and power he knew could only come from his beloved…and he had remembered him using this very stone against this menace, saving him from hungry clutches and granting enough of a defeat to escape.

“Took me a while but your beloved prince left an amazing tool. Apparently only something of a royal’s power, no matter the simplicity, is enough take apart the field, especially one so darkened and belonging to a mere prince. He hasn’t even come to his full power and yet I have already made use of him.”

“He’s a King.” Feliciano gripped and took the stone, hoping he could break it and blow the shards at him.

Khaos shrugged, “his title won’t really matter. When I take control of things, I might feel like leaving him a prince…if I plan to keep him alive that is.”

“I won’t let such a thing happened,” Feliciano let his harbored determination illuminate strong.

Khaos let out a chuckle, “then prove yourself.”

Before Feliciano could respond, a shard flew well in front of the Dark King, widening those darkening eyes, a single little slash at the point of his nose, in only half a second landing well in entrance and standing on the snow.

“He won’t be alone,” was the voice that joined, a Heartian King presented like a gentleman figure, honored even if in his war uniform. Soon after, one by one, the once King of the Dark Kingdom was presented to all the present royals, decorated in their own colors, shows of progress in their seals, protected in powerful shields to compare to his power he could tell, brandishing different weapons and spells ready to release and start. Even the smallest, Lili Zwingli, Queen of the Diamond Kingdom, showed menace and wielded in her hands a spell.

Surprise was clear in his face, mainly at the suddenness of all of them presented, not shared to the rest of the armies who began their approach, being seen, yet still, waiting for the proper word.

Khaos stood alone, easy to take, like a sure victory that they could take in a matter of minutes without even having to use their men and women. They all took a single step forward, testing what seemed like a simplicity. It didn’t pass unnoticed to Khaos, who chuckled, not moved, the cold intensifying his laughter, loud and boisterous throughout the now open field, shivers in its echo that spread to even the soldier in the furthest back of the crowds.

“How quaint! It’s adorable, it’s childish, it’s-” he was thrown over, with a single punch cladded in blue strength, taking a harsh landing deep in the further snow, startling him intensely, but not hurting, not even a bruise…especially when Alfred had used a powerful spell.

Arthur smiled behind him, knowing how Alfred was still adjusting to using magic. It was a big difference then already settling on his guns.

“Gods, let’s just fight and get this over with!”

Yao was ready to bring another blow to add, his staff ringing beautifully even if it was soon to arise deadly blue fires.

“Ragazzi…” Feliciano called, stepping forward in an acceptive space they all gave him, “it is my duty to face him.”

“We will not let you alone,” Roderich said, looking so tall as he wielded a large and heavy sword.

“Do what you need to. We’ll be right here if anything,” Ludwig smirked and in it Feliciano could see a whole thriving world.

“Ah, but you’re only sending me but a boy-” he hadn’t said much as Feliciano didn’t waste a moment to advance, a large swing with a reddening field that pushed in smoke and hardship. He already stood so proudly as the spell was finished, while Khaos continued to cough in the ground.

There was still so much to do, but Feliciano smiled knowing that he managed that stand he had practiced so much to do and especially while facing Khaos.

This was already starting out pretty well.

He breathed, he clapped his hands, decorating himself in fire, marks brandishing across his skin, calling what he was, an Ace and a hero to expect. From that gathered fire, he pierced the ground and used it to move quicker, anytime fire to arise and burn. He began a fighting dance with Khaos, who already looked so exhausted as he ducked and moved avoiding every crack, throw and even kick or punch Feliciano could manage. It was quite a show that left all to only stare in awe, occasionally tripping or falling whenever either of the fighting figures used something strong enough to shake the very ground.

Khaos used a ring spell, wanting to spread it, in it thunders of pain and reactors surely to bring all in the area to their knees and instantly defenseless. Feliciano worked quick to take and break it, swinging it in impressive strength across the field, bringing it down to the ground, another shake, Khaos took another fall and it granted more anger. He already looked so eldered and sickened as he struggled to stand, but managing to call forward, loud words in the language of darkness that none could understand, and none would be expectant of. Before they could even react, from the snow, like blooming plagues, darkened men came, armored and readied in weapons as their enemies. Kiku shouted, but spared a kick to go along, throwing off the first darkened soldier, starting a beginning of smiles and confidence with the royals.

“For the four kingdoms!” Roderich raised his sword high, with it a lamp of green extending to the sky, a signal for all to see and know.

“Brethren, attack!” Abasi shouted, riding along with his people, commencing and signaling with a light spell, its shine strong enough to already disintegrate some of the soldiers, not being exposed to White Kingdom magic in so long.

“Charge!” Lien, leading a group of the Spadian High Protection Squadron, shouted along, the first to crash and meet the beginning wave, already slashing and cutting with the sharp edges of their swords. Priya moved swiftly between, blowing them away in spells, holding them in air enough for the Vikings, these led by Emil, to pierce with their spears and weapons. Zuma crashed bare hands into fully armored heads, destroying and pulverizing with pure spells of the White Kingdom. Young Soo, who was near as he did this, couldn’t help but stare in wonder, wishing to do the same, so he went on. Sure his disintegrating not as intense as he didn’t posses such power from the deceased kingdom, but it was winning and diminishing enemy numbers. Sefina and Nadia moved between a mist they created together, using the dark men’s blindness to choke and kick in quick submission. They let it fall when it got too

large and they needed larger numbers to attack. Ivan came to lead well his more rough and large looking soldiers to traverse the field, their stature enough to run over easily, victorious chants to last. Francis, ever so elegantly and suave, swirled with a beautiful sword, deadly if even how shinning and clean he looked…like he wasn't battling surrounded by the most gruesome men. This kept them all distracted by the show in the center field, by the height of the Darkened King and the Heartian Queen, flying and exploding with mere swings of strong swords they now used.

In one fault, Feliciano was hurled downward, the pain choking, parts of his clothes burning… but all he cared about watching were the gloves, which luckily remained intact.

"Torrente!" He suddenly called, focused on making it loud. Khaos laughed, finding it useless as Feliciano was nearing the ground and nothing had occurred.

Kandake was the first to response, throwing high a white capsule she kept. Lukas threw his own, as did Tino, Haris, Tulio, Vash and six more different soldiers they had chosen, spread in a perfect circle around the battling field. They were small and singular in their distance, looking plain and useless. Khaos hadn't even noticed them.

"Cover!" Abasi shouted.

"Quick! Quick! Quick!" Carlos joined in warning, riding and rapidly informing. It was the only thing Khaos had turned to notice and when he gazed back to his opponent, Feliciano bared a teasing smirk. He whispered a simple spell, extending his hands rather beautifully, stars of white coming out, each reaching a capsule and instantly there were strong winds, brushing, intensifying and clearing the area. It combined with the once trapped blizzard, growing and making the sudden storm they made the true fear they intended. Luckily, with aid of the winds Feliciano could control, he landed well on the ground, kneeling down and letting the grey, the snow, the hits that blew all across, deal with the darkened King…which he could not find now, lost surely in the torrents.

It became too powerful to take, Feliciano not being able to stand from his guarded spot, between hills of snow and shells and remains of weapons and spells that had been used.

"Feliciano!" Came the call and the Queen found the company of his King, kneeling well with him, sword with darkened remains of those he had slain, cuts on his uniform and skin and unruly hair. He breathed heavily, taking this encounter as a small rest, as a hold to his beloved that he couldn't help but worry over even as he had defended and fought well. Feliciano took it no matter, embracing him strongly and wishing this all could be just this, Ludwig's scent, his arms and love and nothing else.

"Your majesties!" Luis had come, kneeling and crawling in defense. He was Alfred's older brother and one of the princes of Spades. He too shone with proofs of battle, but yet as determined to inflict more. "All are taking cover as you commanded. We see no sign of more darkened men and fire seems to have ceased," he informed.

"Tell them to still be cautious and wary. Ciarán must still be working on the endurance spell for us and we cannot really fight well until he's done."

One of Arthur's older brothers, another powerful magician aiding.

"You're all doing an amazing job! Please let everyone know that," Feliciano seemed desperate.

"Will do!" Luis saluted away, intending to send his message between hiding and trying to fight the strong winds that reigned. Ludwig and Feliciano remained watchful on him, until a darkened light caught the corner of their eyes, they turned to the field again, activity in the blankets of snow and the blistering wind.

Darkened cracks, looking like lightning, exploding and bursting like lava, until in its very center this volcano was shown, evil, with strong menace and a presenting that was different from the Khaos they had known. Marks, oozing hideously, crooked smile and eyes, an elongated figure with claws at every end that was the image of true nightmare. Ludwig and Feliciano began to stand, taking last comforts in the robes they still kept for the cold and a hold of their hands. They were not going to be afraid, they were going to show to their people that they could all be brave no matter what presented and what blew around them.

As those evil gleaming eyes laid on them, the Heartian King and Queen felt the strength of Ciarán's spell, the winds now not pushing them so harshly, everything clearer, the cold not so intense and they could expose greater between flying debris in bright red and golden colors, the powerful image to get all around to stand and begin once again, especially with the aid of a storm around them.

"Do you have your sword ready?" Feliciano reminded.

Ludwig unsheathed the royal weapon, beautiful, artistic, but the blade edged with danger and death. "What about your shield?"

It was small, Feliciano being able to take it from his belt, using a simple spell to make it grow, the great symbol of a St. Mark presented, as elegantly and gorgeous as his husband's sword. It was in that very moment that Pookie landed behind them, proud, roaring strong, taking position and waiting for his masters' begin.

They moved only slightly forward, enough to leave whatever defend of snow, exposing themselves true.

"For Glory…" Ludwig started in a simple whisper.

"For Honor…" Feliciano joined in the same light.

"For Riches…"

"For the Gods…" each phrase was more a facing forward.

"For Hearts!" They shouted high those last words, gaining speed and ready to face darkness itself.

Khaos smirked so widely and fearsome, but to Ludwig and Feliciano, it was nothing that they weren't ready to handle.

Chapter 68

Chapter Notes

I’m so sorry it took forever!!!!!! But here it is and I hope you enjoy!!!

Four days of battle trespassed, boiling, firing, menace growing stronger, skies coated in smoke and brilliance of red and the occasional different colors from all different tactics that had been used. Tragic deaths began piling, wounded needed instant care and so, a plan directed by Kiku himself was put in place. A further division was made, an area that they tried hard to keep away from the explosion, throws and raptures of the dark. There the wounded were taken, healers put to work, filled of sufferings, desperation, shown in the rush of nurses and doctors, who had already witnessed deaths and everything around them shone that there would only be more. The smoke and red in the distance was of no aid, and the sounds of battle still rang loudly even there, granting more nightmares and making it much difficult to heal completely. Kiku managed the overseeing while the rest of the royals decided on continuing their fight. For him it was like battling in the very core as he had done before this was settled, jumping from tent to tent, incantations, stitching, disinfecting, bandaging, calming minds and stopping the bloods that poured. Not all the time did it work and Kiku had seen his fair share of last breaths, of sharing in prayers and guidance with the near healers, no more time to give, having to move on with the next despite the hurt of the last.

“Sadiq, really, you need more time,” Kiku said, still bandaging the man’s arm, another young Spadian girl helping with a cloth to rid sweat and dirt.

“My other arm works just fine!” He whaled, raising one of his dual swords, sure despite the tone in his voice.

“You’ll only risk yourself at losing that one too! Arun, take him to Zack. He specifies in this kind of wound and could get him ready in a couple minutes!”

“Will do!” She headed off, holding Sadiq well into the havoc camp.

Kiku was intended to head and heal the head injuries of some wounded citizens of the white kingdom, when his path was interrupted by the entrance of another royal, Elizabeta, using a warrior bear, those trained by the Club Kingdom. She jumped quickly out, battered, bloodied, parts of her armor displaced and missing.

“Where’s Jakub?” She demanded, ferocious and without an ounce of peaceful light.

“At the edges of the fight surely.”

“I need to see him now.”

“What is the matter?”

“He has Petre potions and I need one now,” she demanded in a harshness Kiku was not adjusted from her.

“Petre potions? Elizabeta, that could over exhaust you, even kill you in this state.”

“They need all the help they can get and I cannot, I cannot stop now.”

“Elizabeta, come with me, I can take you to other healers that can better help you.”

“They’ll only want me to rest.”

“And that’s what you need.”

“No! No, I won’t!” She practically growled, taking Kiku by the hem of his shirt, pulling close to see her angers, blazing like the very fires in the horizon. “Don’t make me stop now when its raging hell over there. They need me now and I cannot stall and loose time like this. I have to…I have to be there for Roderich…he’s…tired, wasted and I don’t think he can resist this any longer. Vladimir is keeping him hidden under a protective shield and I doubt it can last. I will not stand to watch them die, so please, call him and I’ll-” tears were in her eyes, lost, confused and unrecognizable. Kiku remained in her hanging lost on how to answer to this lost and frightened woman.

“I’m sorry, Elizabeta, but I cannot risk your life like this.”

She broke as if they had torn her husband before her, and she answered how she learned to do so the last hours, by brandishing a throw and aiming in attack. Kiku cringed and was about to prepare a shield of defense, but that hand instead met the large silver of a sword. It didn’t cut as it wasn’t the edge, just a stand, a quick defense before it could follow through. There were three heavy breaths, Elizabeta and Kiku turning to meet with the Heartian Queen, holding the handle of the sword that divided, along with his mother and brother. The three looked as disheveled, piled with dirt, cuts, tears in their armors and uniforms, exhausted, but a great force aiding in getting them to even stand there.

Between them was a paralyzing silence, away from time even as the commotion of painful moans and distant battle rung on.

“Please, stand back, Elizabeta,” Feliciano commanded, with queenly tone that called for instant obedience, even from another Queen. She did, innocence in her eyes, along with an awakening that made her shake, made her look into her hands as if there was a high crime in them. She could have broken, could have shrilled for the whole camp to hear, but Feliciano made sure to act quick. He was not going to make her loose hope and faith.

“Gupta!” He called, noticing him along with his own group, heading out, ready for battle after surely getting sufficiently healed.

“Yes, your majesty?” He bowed.

“You and your sand casters are ready to act?”

“Instantly, sir!”

“Take Elizabeta with you and make a tunnel attack. Find Roderich and help her to bring him here.”

“Right away!” They settled direction towards.

“Come, let’s go,” Dua took the Clubian Queen’s hand in assurance and they all went to their mission, the three Valenti watching that they were off as well as they could in the situation.

Feliciano let his commanding demeanor fall, with it breathing and easing whatever grasps he kept.

“Feliciano, thank you so much!” Kiku thanked, coming to aid in a hold to his Queen.

“This is driving us insane,” he commented.

“What has happened?” He rarely heard reports.

“Khaos practically kicking our asses and the alignment hasn’t even started yet,” Lovino harshly informed, sickened and maddened. Renata glared, but Lovino shrugged it.

Kiku turned to Feliciano, hoping to hear a difference.

“He keeps creating more men, but we’ve noticed that it’s in a timely amount of batches. We’ve managed to defeat plenty of them, even take breaths in those in-betweens of creation, but each time they come stronger and smarter, understanding our plans before they’re carried out.”

“Khaos is purposely doing this to distract us,” Renata added.

“Have you faced him, Feliciano?”

“After the first day, our meetings are short, and I can’t get anything at him…he’s trying to avoid me.”

“He’s surely waiting for the alignment,” Lovino knew.

“I’m trying to do something before it can get to that.”

“We’ve already done most of our plans and have lost countless of men and women.”

“This is not looking good for when the alignment comes.”

“There’s still Ludwig and I. We still haven’t done the biggest of our plans.”

“And we can’t use them now. The threat is still imminent and the rest of us have to be in our best defense.”

“We’re losing most of it,” Lovino had noticed, checking a moving scroll that showed in lights the magic and formations of what had been it. Indeed only a half of the larger six part scale

was standing.

Feliciano thought and came to a quick command, “we have to get them back. Lovino! Find Lili and convince Vash to let you with her cast the perimeter again. Mamma, the Baltic soldiers know the strong points, tell them to charge them again and help them hold back attacks while doing so.”

No disagrees or disobeys, they headed off to fulfill.

“Kiku, I need a recovery.”

“Instantly!”

They could have gone immediately, but it was just as a ferocious winged lion came, Ludwig falling and taking heading to his queen. Pookie above him took his own rest by transforming back to his little form, cuddling and wanting love after all he had witnessed, one Feliciano could spare to give.

“How’s everything?” Ludwig joined in the holding Kiku gave.

“I’m fine, I swear.”

“We’re managing how we can.”

“How have you dealt?”

“We just finished riding a batch and still no sign of Khaos. Infantries are remaining to fend off for the next one and are replenishing in energy while they wait. I came here for my own recovery and wondering if any more would be willing to join me back.”

“I’ll go with you!”

And so the three worked quick to get those very recoveries, new bandages, new armors, deciding new weapons and making new plans.

“So, what are we going to do?” Feliciano said as he finished the last wrapping on his arm, to make sure the new gloves stayed during the continuing fight.

“Move and search for Khaos. There’s nothing else we can do,” Ludwig made sure his new padding were well strapped.

“There has to be something. We can’t possibly exhaust our men and women like this without even reaching an alignment.”

“There are still many plans to be fulfilled.”

“I know, but if we can-”

“Where’s the harp?” They walked on silent this time, Feliciano nervous to speak. “It is here, isn’t it?”

“It is…but it’s not its fight yet.”

“Not its fight? Feliciano, that could be our key to defeating him now before he reaches the alignment.”

“It won’t work. It will only hinder him and what we need is to kill him. Augusta herself told me for the alignment it would be at its most powerful. I am waiting till then to-”

“Out! Out! Out I say!” Ivan came imposing, leading behind him a group from American provinces in Clubs. They brought a wounded, very familiar one, moaning, practically lifeless, the bed oozing blood and his dark skin looking paler.

“Amaro…” Feliciano recognized.

“Make way! Make way! Make way! He needs help now!” Martín shouted. With Elisa’s help, together they hurriedly moved to the nearest healer that offered, opening an entrance for them, a bed ready and already cast and incantations started. Ludwig and Feliciano couldn’t leave when it was someone they had known well, that they had sang, danced, joked and chatted wonderfully with, now with no light that presented what he had once been.

They joined the rest of the group inside the tent, helping the healers with the expected procedure, trying out spells and incantations that continued to fail. Last resort, Feliciano began to use healing magic with the intensity of his Ace power, it was through it that he discovered for the first time woven lines of faith and destiny in a person, sacred and created by the hands of an Ace. He learned how it started…and how it ended, the plan that not even he could go against and had to let it lead on as intended by the nature the Aces created. He understood as it had been with his grandfather, and could only sigh, kneeling to join the rest. “Somebody take his hand, please.”

Corisande took it desperately, thinking it some part of another healing magic.

“Speak to him…tell him goodbye.”

They all turned with equal shattered expressions.

“What do you mean? Can’t you not-”

“Please…” Feliciano let his eyes water, a great understanding in them that made them all utter such words, close to their friend, talking of past times, of other loved ones, of assurances, prayers, expectancies and waiting. They went on, until Amaro couldn’t hold any more breaths, until a calling became clearer, welcoming and reliving away from these pains. Whatever it was, it embraced him and took with it its last breaths, holds and color, right off his friends’ last embraces and words.

There was nothing more and the first one to act on the dreaded realization was Corisande, who wept loudly and laid on the body, a call hoping to keep him, to let this not be what was happening, to act on such misery and also release the tension, the weight of this awful battle and what it was costing.

Shouts came from outside the tent, calls to the battle, with surely a new batch about to come. Ludwig and Feliciano had to head to it, having to make their way out, slowly, without a word or comforts to spare.

“Please, provide the funeral that you can,” he told a passing healer, who nooded and began quick on the preparations they were used to by now.

Feliciano stared on from the tent opening, with only the same scene of farewell and passing, wishing that there was more he could do.

“I really hope you leaving the harp for later is worth it,” Ludwig commented rather harshly, leaving and joining the new rush of newly healed soldiers that were to head back to the fret.

Those words only gave more weight to Feliciano, a guilt, a crush that could have had him whimpering on the ground if it wasn’t for the severity of the situation.

“Ludwig, I told you, it’s worthless now, Augusta herself told me,” Feliciano tried to defend, going behind him.

“Never mind what she said, it can help now and you’re only endangering more lives by continuing to wait.”

“I’ll only risk more lives if I use it now.”

“How could it do so? How dangerous can it truly be?”

“The vision Augusta gave me was more grandiose than you can imagine, only meant for the intensity of what Khaos will become and anyone in between would surely die. It won’t reach that power without the alignment and it needs all that energy for when the time comes. Please, trust me, Ludwig, I’ll know what to do!”

“I know! I know!...I know…” he exploded, but then calmed, managing a breath in the middle of turmoil, peace in this space between him and his Queen. “It’s not that I don’t trust you, I’m just…tired and…terribly worried…about all, about you, I…I’m so scared,” he fell, letting himself weakness, but showing him human.

Feliciano closed in and caressed his face, raising him to his strength, for their eyes to connect in powerful magic. “There is still so much we haven’t proven…plans and ideas we haven’t done. Our time will come and Khaos will know to fear us. We’ll do fine…we will defeat him. I’m sure we can do this together,” he smiled and Ludwig couldn’t hold his own back, taking that hold of his hand, kissing it and showing his belief in those words.

They had learned well from the other to show pride and strength, and it shone well even in that disastrous center they took. For a moment they were ignorant, a closing in for their lips, a last delight before battle, when Ludwig felt something odd in the direction the soldiers were taking. They weren’t going forward, but backwards, scared, not at all in the orders they were trained for. Feliciano noticed as well, both turning their gazes forward, only to see more people coming in frantic crowds.

“What’s going on?” He told a passing White Kingdom member, who seemed tired, fear taking her voice.

“They’re coming! They’re coming here! We have to move this entire camp now!” She headed off, now the royals noticing how these new soldiers came to help everything to be moved.

“But…the defensive shields?” Feliciano wondered.

“Did not work.” Something crashed, in burning intense lights of darkness, giant, all in the area, including Ludwig and Feliciano, flying and burning to the magic, fallen and trying to breathe out the new pain.

New shouts of terror, a new flight of darkness, men in those evil colors invading what they could do in their waking vision. Some did well to quickly defend, healers picking their sick and driving them away as far as they could. Others fought, but it was a large multitude in a space they had thought was safe, outnumbered, sudden, with other larger worries than those of attacking with their highest abilities, not something they could do when there were countless of wounded and sick that needed more healing in the area. It was in this disarray that Khaos decided to appear himself in, smiling, uncaring and only commanding more men to take and ravage how they wanted.

“You’re evil!” Feliciano shouted, taking instant stand, his sword glowing with a special red spell that worked to gain more energy as well as to give to any of the warriors that continued to fight in the vicinity.

“Oh, such a word doesn’t bother me!” Khaos only shrugged it, perfect stride, elegant in his wear, coming close as if he was walking down to his powerful throne. “You still bother to try? Go on right ahead, nothing will work. I do like a good practice though. So, come, what do you have for me now?”

Feliciano was ready to pierce that energy with his sword right in the center, raging with fires ready, instead, the figure was gone, stumbled out with a special field that knocked him, made him cut and bleed, furious reds back in his eyes that only made him darker and with new maddened magic to grow.

Kiku now stood in aid, having used a staff to omit his spell. “Mind if I join? I have to practice myself.”

Feliciano smiled in his welcome and now Ludwig stood as well, fixed from his fall, magic on his fists.

Khaos sat and stared to the three together, laughing, calling forward dual curved swords, beginning a lighting of dark magic power.

“Ah yes! All three great highnesses of the proud Hearts! What a banquet this will be! I will enjoy what I will do to your people!”

“I will forbid it!” Kiku bellowed, jumping forward, high his staff going and calling a gain of red stars that crashed in the landing of the dark king. It managed a burning of those clothes he

had strutted so well to show, angering, clawing and trying a riding of Kiku's staff with bare hands, his swords now tucked away. Feliciano joined in kicks and punches, his sword a support, to keep him grounded or distracted while Kiku continued to throw different spells on him. Whenever Kiku needed time, Ludwig will take control, his own physical attacks blended with dark and Heartian magic firing at every core of Khaos. Yet their many successes, Khaos would still grab them with extended rays of cracked darkness, throw them against harsh debris, choke, pierce with electrifying poison through their bodies that would leave them incapacitated, sometimes only having but one or two of the three fighting while another tried quick healing techniques. More than ever they appreciated those long hours of training with Mr. Egilhard, of learning to really work together at whatever strengths, they just wished they could omit more.

After a long moment, they were beginning to get tired, dirty and bruised, Khaos not giving a single chance to breathe as he continued his physical assaults, tinged with poison that made it painful to give any stance. They couldn't grow or release any spell like this, now only depending on the force they gave their weapons and their throws. Ludwig kept forcing magic even if it exhausted him more, the only of the three being able to use darkness to their advantage. He kept reigning sparks to electrocute and burn, what they couldn't reach, he cut at Khaos with his sword, wonderfully between rays he called, like nothing was dragging or hurting every extend.

Ludwig had succeeded in making Khaos sweat, heave, loose enough sight so Kiku could push and pull, Feliciano focusing on healing and spreading more energy to his companions. It was too much, for both Ludwig and Kiku's skin was starting to burn from the intense power. Kiku was going through enough to mind, while for Ludwig, it wasn't the first time, and years and spending a childhood on dealing with this helped to keep him standing and attacking. Yet despite how hard he tried to ignore it, to focus more on the positive power, it wasn't enough to equilibrate. It was a slight movement out of place that Khaos took to his advantage, grabbing that attack and using it to take Ludwig and slam him gone, pierced to the ground, damaged, every strain landing to keep him landed and trapped between the debris. Khaos smiled, traitorous, unmerciful as he raised high a large bladed sword. Its aim was to impact and shred the Heartian King to nothing, easy that instant, Ludwig trying to heal, trying to move, but there was no action he could call. Just when Khaos was to take the plunge, there was a shout, a push, he met with the ground. Khaos stood quick to try and get back at the King, instead his sword met the small yet menacing blade of the Queen, rubbing and actually having him move back, more so with a fire that rung in the smaller man's eyes.

"You stand away! Stay away from my husband!" He shouted, pushing him more.

Khaos didn't bother, trying to move aside, only to meet once again with the sword. No matter how he moved around, Feliciano swiftly and with great maneuver was before him, their swords meeting and yet the same burn in his eyes, an anger more intense than the body it inhabited.

"Move away!" He tried to command.

"Never!" A slash pushing him more so, with a powerful tone in his voice, mighty and as a towering as an Ace's should be.

Khaos knew it as a sign…a sign that the alignment was drawing closer. In a glance up, he almost let himself be torn in two right by the top of his head, but he stopped the blade with his bare hands just before. He held the weapon above him, still with life and determination to keep its harsh descend, shaking and eager. There was shine in Feliciano's eyes, with danger, feral, wanting nothing more than his demise. It wouldn't fear him, Khaos told himself, it was nothing, there was always a weakness he could spot, something out of place, something different. That's when his eyes focused on the gloves.

From what he met him when he first entered field and of the reports his spying men would send him, Feliciano was not one to usually cover his hands. One's power is freer to be set when hands are bared and Feliciano would surely not cover them on such battles. Unless…

"Are those gloves helping you?" He dared ask.

Feliciano only grew angrier, pushing his sword.

"Come, come, come now, what are the needs of such things?" He reached a hand to grasp one, Feliciano releasing one hand to smack it off, in that instant letting the sword fall away from its target. Khaos took that opportunity to quickly take a threatening hold of both Feliciano's wrist, weakened, worried and fretting, his body one he could easily raise, to his wanting that instant.

Kiku tried to strengthen his healing spells, hoping he could stand to do something. Ludwig grasped his hands on the debris, trying to call a spell, anything to get his beloved away from those hands. Feliciano could only whimper, with only but one worry for his children despite how he tried to pull himself away, mouth dried for spells, weak and pained to try any of the bigger attacks.

"Something…is odd…" Khaos noticed Feliciano's constant glances to the area he held, far from worry of cuts or even cleanliness.

No…there was something else. He had those very hands before him to see.

Slow, steady, managing to keep Feliciano still under grasps, he went for one, removing at a surprising silent pace. Feliciano tried to shout, tried to move away, to cry, but it only intensified the grasp from the other hand Khaos still kept. He couldn't stop at his hand was now free, the glove useless on the ground, and the red jewel shone well, clean and beautiful in this disaster.

"Oh my…" Khaos inspected, but he was quick to come to conclusions, for eyes to widen and ring laughter to awake, for Kiku and Ludwig's own reactions to reach, to fall, what they could see only trapping them more to the ground.

"Bearing! You went into battle bearing!" He shouted well in the area, an agreeable silence coming, all the near fighting stopping, surrounding soldiers, meeting with the news, Khaos raising Feliciano ever higher, exposed to a blame. Feliciano fretted, a break in his eyes that was delicious to Khaos. He tried to save the situation how he could, punching with intensity with his freed hand that showed everyone his expectance. It only worked to show that there

was something else, so Khaos went to uncover the other gloved hand before he tried anything that could be successful.

“Ah! Twins!” He shouted, noticing the other jewel, raising Feliciano higher, now with a single hand, now having him hanging, finding it funny how Feliciano swung himself for an escape, kicking and grunting.

“Ludwig, you beast! You took my suggestion and enjoyed yourself. I’m actually kind of jealous, but what an outstanding job you have created.” He threw Feliciano, one of the hands landing right before Ludwig, the jewels there, true, red and…it was happening…Feliciano was…

Khaos noticed the oddity, the deep surprise in Ludwig’s eyes, how it kept him immobile, whatever spells or actions to try and raise him back up halted.

He was…trying to believe this.

“You…didn’t know?” He realized.

Ludwig glared at him, but with it Khaos came to understand enough.
“You didn’t know…” He turned to Kiku, kneeled forward, trying to get an impulse to move, but despite it…he could only stare at the jewel, commanded as well by the surprise.

“…you didn’t know.” Khaos turned to some of the other soldiers of the vicinity, different ones from different kingdoms, even some he noticed from his damned deceased sister’s. They were all just as paralyzed, as stricken to even do something to fight.

“None of you knew…nobody knew!” He shouted, well into the air, spun and letting it traverse across the field, ended with ferocious laughter. “How very unqueenly of you, Feliciano. Hiding such…blessing news,” he mocked with a sneer. “Augusta had twins herself, shortly before you know…she was supposed to face me. From what I know, it was because of that Romulus left her behind that day of the alignment. And oh! Now I get why you wanted to keep it a secret. Some trust you have in Ludwig, hm?” He teased, an annoying stance that Feliciano tried to punch at, but he was too weakened, it came out with nothing, not even a hit as he struggled to stand.

“Oh, no, no, no, we must protect the royal babies,” he cooed, evil still, moving away. He halted when he felt a sudden burn in his back, light magic he could tell. He expected to turn and see some annoying ant from the white kingdom, but he startled for a moment thinking it Augusta. No…it wasn’t her…it couldn’t be her. She grimaced, the magic in her hands intensifying and spreading like music, blackening more the skin under his robes, ready to shred he knew.

Despite how her hair was tousled, the dirt, the cuts, the bruises, even the way she slouched, she was fearsome, not letting herself minimize. He smirked, easily moving aside despite how he got the stronger part of the spell, an intense burn, but he walked past it, not wanting to show it, biting his teeth and only striding in the elegance and the fear inducing he wanted.

“I see you have a lot to talk about, so I better be off. I need to relax and have some tea. We can get back to business afterwards,” he turned and smirked, sadistic but even childlike, with a skip to his heals. A dark incantation and darkness spread across the area. All the dark men flew with him in smoke, to nothingness, to shocking silence, trace of evil gone, of battle screams, attacks, metal bangs, worded spells, nothing. Even the smoke, the smells, the haunting colors were gone, leaving it almost like nothing had ever happened.

Renata, sure that there was no threat that instant, much to her husband’s pull, she freed of it and kneeled next to her son, caressing his face, already starting healing spells and hurrying what she could with strains and blood stains. Vincenzo went and did the same with Ludwig.

“Amore! Amore! Tell me, where do you need the most help? What can I do?” She took in his arms, then settling them down until…the jewels, the proof…her youngest son was bearing, indeed twins…yet other grandchildren to have. Oh, in another situation she would have been ecstatic, jumping and shouting it to all, but now, she could only but sigh, give a slight caress, new weights of worry.

Feliciano didn’t want that…it was the whole reason he had hid it, avoiding this awful silence, blame, disappointment. There was another gaze worst, from blue eyes only, with anger and betrayal that Feliciano could feel burning on him without even having to look at Ludwig.

“Feliciano…” Kiku then came, wanting to offer his help alongside his mother, but of course…he was drawn to the jewels, still trying to understand, unknown and unsure, lost in even where to start.

Feliciano despised it all, glaring, moving his hands harshly away, hiding the marks by bringing both his hands together, hid in a cross on his chest.

“Mamma, Kiku, I need you to find him,” he went forward to commanding, trying to erase this.

“Khaos? Find Khaos? Feliciano, we really should be-”

“No…find him. I noticed a group of Amazonians still fighting in the area. Tell them I told you to join. Scout every part of the once field, get into the castle, dig, I don’t care, just find him.” There was such unfamiliar threat in his voice, refusing to look at them, at anybody, wanting to hide in a shelter of himself.

How they wanted to disobey, back out and instead work on the dealings needed for Feliciano and making sure the coming twins were safe as well. Renata raised a hand to argue, but the intensity she met in her son’s eyes, still in raging war, made her fear to a lowering, to an almost hypnotic state that forced her to stand, to even bow, taking Kiku alongside her to join.

“We shall,” she last said before they were off to the remnants of the last battles, through debris, bodies, smoke and battered weapons, to even worsened ruin lands in favor of obeying their Queen.

Feliciano thought he could finally breathe alone, away, but that’s when he noticed his father’s nearing, sharing the same array as the rest, a soothing in his voice as he was still trying to

find the best way to speak to his own son.

“Feliciano…you still need to be taken to heal and…check. I will not take other orders.”

There were no others Feliciano could give him, no matter how he trembled as his mind tried to find something. It only worsened when he felt a near, connecting, and powerful figure stand despite his heavy injuries, walking forward, seeming to sink the ground around him and Feliciano wanted to join the dirt in whatever disappearance it took.

He couldn’t turn, he was too scared to turn. The last time he had felt like this with Ludwig…

he had tried so hard to forget those days, he thought them passed, a conquering that wouldn’t dare to come back, but here it was again and he had no other turn but to stare at those deepened lost blues of his husband. Unlike others, his glance to the jewels were quick, not as long as the ones he bore on Feliciano’s own eyes, speaking already anger, betrayal and large thoughts of disarrays.

“Ludwig…I…” Ludwig didn’t give him the chance to speak, he simply turned and walked, following the lead of some nurses, taking the forward walk himself even with a limp and a battered body. And Feliciano felt cold, felt like shivering if even the heats that now reigned this once snowy field. Let it take him, engulf him, right now it was better than continuing to meet icy eyes.

“…Feliciano…” his father called again, the hand on his shoulder comforting, gentle as he helped him to raise, forcing him to accept the aid of lean from the healers that came.

His body walked on its own by some unknown force. He felt blinded, not being able to see well where he was being taken to. His mind was lost to the answer of Ludwig’s silence, anger in it he could tell that refused to meet with him and a look of blue depths that he let himself flood in.

The jewels in his hands sank him heavier.

Chapter 69

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Feliciano was bandaged, numerous healing spells were placed on him that were still doing its effect, he was forced to drink potions, to try breathing exercises and to keep his mind calm with words that Kandake was there to spare.

“The twins are doing fine,” she at least let him know with a deep smile upon her last checking, one that was watched by many healers in the room, who surely held the same curiosity.

He was glad to know that despite the excesses in this war, his children had survived through the first wave. He gloomed once he knew there would be several more, worst now that Khaos knew about it. He brought his arms to wrap around himself as if he was hugging them, letting them know in this warmth that everything would be all right. He would protect them and do the necessary so they are born into the world he wishes to make for them.

As the healers considered themselves done with the Queen’s care, they began emptying the tent, leaving more space, more sight…to the King’s sitting, glaring, dark, imposing even with his own bandages, left without the strong symbols and defense of his armors.

It was terrifying, having Feliciano hitch his breath, refusing to look more into those piercing swords, the only comfort the caress he gave to the jewels, now new vines having begun their surroundings. Feliciano wondered if Ludwig was even blinking, as he kept a singular gaze towards him that didn’t give the slightest movement, no beating of breaths, no tapping, no pointing. Even as the tent continued its emptying, many leaving as they understood their royals were to speak on the coming heirs, he was frozen, even so when there was finally nobody there, their only evidence but murmurs outside. Feliciano sighed as it elongated with nothing, trying to hold an outpour of tears as he moved his direction to his husband.

“I…did something terrible, I know,” he admitted, hoping to hear Ludwig’s agree…yet he remained as he was. “I…I want to apologize but I know it won’t mean anything. You must be very angry and no matter what I say, it won’t change your mind on the fact that I dared come to war bearing our children.” It was the first time he said it out loud as such, and for once he drew out a breath from his husband, a calming one, a small glimpse of ease in his eyes, but he was still as fortified.

“But…you know that I couldn’t just stay behind…I couldn’t just let you all deal with this without my help. I knew…” he gripped his arm around himself tighter, “you wouldn’t let me go.”

No reply, no reaction, Feliciano thought his words lost in the air.

“…you should have told me…” Ludwig’s words were so meek, Feliciano had to keep his ears perked to have been able to hear it.

“I know…I know…”

No more words, no more glances or even acknowledgement. It was like neither was there, the words but those murmurs and movements from outside the tent. Feliciano let himself the tears, the whimpers, but he refused a leaning, still managing to keep a proud sitting, a caress to the jewels. Ludwig eyes fell heavily on them that moment, for once giving them the extended gaze everyone else had done on the finding. He constantly tightened the grasp of his hands, at one point his breaths became heavy to the point that Feliciano could easily hear them, surely the same thoughts Feliciano held when he had found out.

Bearing, now? In this war, with Khaos, with a future of uncertainty. Would he be strong enough to protect not just Feliciano, but the jewels that held his children? Would he be able to give them the lifestyle of princes or princesses afterwards? Could the world they’ll be granted be the one he always dreamed for his heirs, the one he himself lived? Could he face whatever Khaos will throw now in certainty to rid of them as well? Could he…oh but there was glow, a red, a small moment of love, devotion and sacrifice, oh so much sacrifice for them already.

He loved them. He already adored them and wanted nothing more than protection, their warmth, wanted them held in Feliciano’s arms, knowing that it’s where they would feel the biggest of love and power.

He would do that…he would grant them that…even if it meant…

“We’re leaving…” he decreed, standing, taking a jacket, his boots and beginning his wear.

“Wha-what? Leaving?” Feliciano looked up startled yet tears still coating him well.

“To Berlin. This instant.”

“Now? We can’t just-”

“Now! Feliciano! Get what you need now.” He headed out from the tent, already decreeing to anybody near, hoping that any could give them the sudden transportation, opening and navigation on quickest way back to Berlin.

“I need to be there by tomorrow morning,” he had told, and many had bowed and followed sure.

Feliciano had grabbed a jacket and cloak quick, still with stings, but pushed it aside as he followed behind Ludwig, trying to understand what exactly he was doing, trying to hold down any commands, for anybody to explain anything they knew. None of them did, yet they followed, for the Heartian King’s tone and eyes begged and angered in ways they knew it would end dangerous if they disobeyed.

Tino was the first one to bring them a pair of small silver dragons, surely from the Scandinavian provinces in Hearts, tied to a coach decorated Heartian. Many had already given them way so they could settle off.

“They’re the fastest dragons out there and will get you to Berlin by the morning you wish. They can be a little distracted, but I have talked to some of my men and they will accompany you to make sure they obey as they should.”

“Perfect. Are they ready to leave this instant?” He already took their reigns.

“Right away, your majesty.”

“Feliciano, get in!” He shouted, one of the Viking men opening the door for the Queen.

“Ludwig, I can’t just-”

“Get in!” He shouted, burning angry, growing taller, imposing with shades of darkness that made him as menacing…well…as menacing as Khaos.

Feliciano trembled, meek, small under his shadow. He tried to find exit in any of the nearing lights, dared to move away, but Ludwig’s fury had attracted eyes, worried, judging, their eyes still constant on the exhibited jewels in Feliciano’s hands. It pushed him forward to the coverage of the coach, grasping his hands in hiding, head down, not wanting to look at anything, not at the red and golden intricacies of the coach, nor at the majestic silver dragons or even as the surrounding weighted more with Ludwig’s entrance, sitting right next to his Queen, shutting the door with a loud bang, enough command in it to let the others know that they should begin flying or running or whatever these dragons did. In all honesty, he didn’t care, he just wanted to make it back home.

Words were shouted in different Scandinavian languages outside, and after mere seconds, the coach was being raised in the air as the dragons began taking their flight, others of the joker Vikings surely using their magic to stabilize the coach enough so it could fly well in its passage. Despite the rarity of such a mode of transportation, the constant movement of the coach as it flew above the battered land, the speed, the rush of the Club and Hearts kingdom under them, they remained silent, apart, looking down, their eyes not really fixed, they felt like they weren’t really there.

They arrived to Berlin at the sunrise of the next day. The sky was in a beautiful shade of oranges, blues and purples, the city silent, many surely still in their beds, unaware of the return of their royals. A maid who had been awake managed to spot the animals and the coach, coming from the distance, the joker Vikings on it signaling their descend and the presence of their King and Queen. She fretted and began waking and warning the entire castle. Many were up and standing, reaching the entrance courtyard, dressed still in their nightwear, including the former King and Queen. The coach landed right on their footsteps and before any ceremonious thing could start, Ludwig was out the coach, Feliciano following him as he wanted out of that trapped space and into the familiar sight of his castle.

It was odd for him to see something so pristine, cleaned, unfazed…when in the last few days he had been used to fields destroyed and continuing fires that were hungrily eating all.

“Ludwig, what is the meaning of this?” Aldrich fretted, coming before him and wanting immediate answers.

Ludwig moved past him, forcing Feliciano to do so as well.

“You’re both supposed to be dealing with Khaos back in the field!” Louis reminded hoping she could awake them.

They passed her as well. That’s when she noticed a shine in Feliciano’s hand, following it, finding the jewels and gasping at its knowing.

“Feliciano! What is this?” She shouted, now more desperate in her voice and going behind them, stomping and trying to be imposing even in the silk and simplicity of her nightgown.

“What, what is the matter?”

“I believe she saw the bearing marks on Feliciano,” one maid noticed as well, trailing behind the former king as he gave his own astounded rush behind the couple.

“Bearing! Feliciano! Are you really bearing?” Aldrich shouted.

The assembled went down the halls none the less, the King and Queen silent, Ludwig leading on, Feliciano with his head down, the shouts behind him only weighting more on his head, tempting to make more tears fall out. He tried to keep his hands under his cloak, tried to warm himself from a shiver.

“What is going on?” A new voice came, Feliciano ready to ignore as all the rest, but he couldn’t ignore those green eyes, couldn’t ignore the little hand reaching for him. Without even thinking, he came forward and picked his nephew in his arms, embracing, kissing, rocking and wanting to remain with him instead of whatever mystery Ludwig had in store.

“Your fathers are all right. They’re fighting so much for you and they miss you lots,” he whispered to the little one, who smiled unknowingly. “They love you, amore. And I love you very much too.” The little boy found himself wrapping himself completely on his uncle, and Feliciano let a hand caress at his small strands of wavy hair, the jewel now showcased and sure for all to see, who stood as Feliciano devoted to Augustino. The deepest gasp was of the caretaker, like a ring of alarm and Feliciano noticed what he had silently told. He only looked up to Ludwig, waiting, begging, not wanting to look at anybody else.

Wanting to avoid the questions that would surely come, he reluctantly had to give Augustino to the hands of his caretaker. He didn’t dare turn, he only walked on along the halls still shaded in darkness with Ludwig, leaving the others in accepted silence, remaining in their place with only wondering and hopes for answers later. Augustino yawned and looked ready to head back to his bed.

They went deep, pass unfamiliar halls, abandoned works and with darkness that had been there for surely decades. Feliciano reached a hand, hoping Ludwig could now tell, could turn to him different and say…everything was going to be all right. That’s what he needed, those

were the words he wanted, but Ludwig kept moving away from them, kept hiding, only stopping once they reached a dead end.

“Why are we-” Ludwig passed his hands over what surely had to be some old encryption, the symbol glowing red by his palm, loud hinges, dust flying, a shake, movement…this specific square they were on began a descend down.

Feliciano by now was shaking, feeling colder, wanting nothing than a wrap of arms. Ludwig must have felt for it, for in a moment of compassion he came near and let those very arms take him, caressing, kissing a sort of comfort to his head. Feliciano adored this act, but it didn’t erase the questions, didn’t make the unease he felt go away.

The descend continued, through depths he didn’t think extended more than the other darkened halls of where the harp was once located. He wondered if he would even truly visit all the secrets of the Heartian castle. Each time there was something new, something to change and- it finally stopped to yet another hall. Ludwig let go, but keeping a hand to Feliciano’s own, moving forward without an ounce of hesitation, the Queen only taking small steps, until he noticed that the hall was circular, extending around another important room. The walls were in the expected reds, wines and golds, with paintings of several different Queens…all with their children in them. The floor was ornated with fallen pillars, vases or statues, with dust, cobwebs and cracks that signified the rarity of such a hall being used. They turned in what seemed infinite circles, but finally they met with a large deep reddened door, one that they only but had to push to be introduced.

It was a large circular room as Feliciano expected, beautiful, with frescos, rose curtains, a round bed with clean sheets and blankets, ornated as wonderfully. A particular thing was the glass dome that took its ceiling, in a sunset gold, woven with vines designs that really didn’t offer a view to something particular. A light surely from the sun came down, illuminating the room in a kind warmth. How in this deepened room could it reach was Feliciano’s question.

As he looked around to what the light showcased, he noticed many shelves filled with all kinds of blankets, magical jewels, potions and…toys…clothes and blankets…mostly for newborns. This… he realized… this was once a birthing chamber…it was a place that they had built to gather as much comforting energies as possible to make it easier for the birthing father or mother, private, away from any eyes that could bring danger, until they knew it was safe to bring the infant prince or princess to the higher towers and the real glow of the sun.

“The last one to use this room was my great grandfather, only for the healing and calming magic around it. He was brought up to the castle with opa right after the day he was born. There weren’t really threats and much of the healing magic here they managed to transport to other rooms up in the castle…and after him, the castle just didn’t find it useful to keep coming here. Still, under some strict rules and scheduling, maids come here from time to time just to make sure that the sheets and towels are fine…in the event the time could come to use it again,” Ludwig easily told as he spun the room, inspecting. Feliciano expected more an explanation, yet silence elongated.

“Why did you bring me here?” The question was now clear, with no distraction or even noise.

Ludwig found himself gripping an old decorative column, turned away and not even at this mentioning did he meet his gaze with the other.

“They…won’t arrive now…I’ve only been bearing for about a month,” he reminded just in case, but Ludwig remained as he was.

Feliciano gave a frustrated sigh, “Ludwig, millions of people are risking their lives at the field right now and it’s heavily important were there too for if Khaos returns. The alignment is in a matter of days and we cannot waste time silent like this…” the words echoed, but their spread didn’t produce a response either.

Boiling anger began, Feliciano deciding on keeping a grasp to his cloak so he wouldn’t rail on in it. “I told you once that it hurts when you distance yourself away from me…when you hide and don’t tell me what’s going on.” It stung like it used to, producing tears and shivers. Those whimpers got Ludwig to finally turn, approaching with such love that Feliciano couldn’t deny as it wrapped around him, as it turned his head and kissed with thousands of passions, coloring and making Feliciano obeying to its ignition, mending back, hands over each other, but especially on their necks and hair, intensifying such a powerful kiss that didn’t even make them notice as they reached the bed, as they were laid, as if they were in peace, as any other day in the castle that they dedicated to their devotion. That vivacity in their gazes, that warmth that settled, those caresses on each other trusting, not controlled, they seemed to follow their own path of love.

“I once told you…I would do anything…absolutely anything to keep you safe…to make you happy…” he took his hands and brought it to his lips, that promised shouted enough. He caressed the jewels with loving intention, wanting to whisper endless love for them as well. “…even if it means not having me… I would rather die than let anything happen to you…”

Feliciano only saw defeat in that expression, raising his hands to caress at the side of his face. He noticed the reddening of Ludwig’s eyes, edged with tears, ones that he easily wiped away with the soft pad of his fingers.

“No…there is no need…you die, I might as well die myself.”

Ludwig sighed, “you’ll find your way.”

“No! I won’t!” He brought him down and held him tighter, bringing him away from such faith. “Why do you even say that? Nothing is going to happen, Ludwig! We’re going to be fine! Everything is going to be fine.” Yet he whimpered those words, falling at his own tears, joining Ludwig’s own, both laying and keeping their hold on another, tighter, tighter, tighter and tighter, their comfort and their revolve. They wanted nothing else, they wanted no more thoughts sketched with worries, on twins, on Khaos, on alignments, on whether it was to be victorious or even not. They just wanted this wrap and let everything else crumble away.

Somehow between that panicked fest, they breathed again, they eased, they could speak. “I like… Alexander…and Heinrich…if they’re girls…I like Analiese and…Giovanna…” Ludwig whispered tenderly, in such softness Feliciano couldn’t avoid smiling to.

“Hmm…I think I prefer Alessandro though…and I always wanted to have a little Bella…I like Isabella.”

Ludwig chuckled against his neck. “Fine…two boys, Alessandro and Heinrich. Two girls, Analiese and Isabella. One boy, Alessandro, one girl, Isabella. Promise?”

Feliciano didn’t understand, but in the sweetness, in that smile and enchantment in Ludwig’s eyes as he raised to meet their gazes once again…he nodded and uttered, “…promise.”

Ludwig leaned to his forehead, keeping the uttered well on his mind to make him sure.

“When…I found out about what it meant you being Augusta’s great grandson,” he began, voice soothing and lulling that kept Feliciano relaxed, “…I…prepared for many things…for the alignment, for you…for if we had heirs…and…I told myself to stay true to them no matter…even if most changed and it ended…with marrying you and truly showing you my emotions…but now…” It felt like there was more that needed to be told, but there was a new care in his eyes that drove him more into Feliciano.

“Augusta herself once used this room…”

There was actually a painting of her with her own twin boys, the children looking glowing and beautiful…but Ludwig could read misery in the eyes of this representation of Augusta.

Feliciano didn’t seem to notice.

“I love you. Dearly, infinitely and the power fitted for a king,” he leaned and kissed Feliciano into a lost of that depth, hazed to the point that Feliciano swore he could only but look at the colors of this love, surely in their kingdom symbols, hypnotized and stranded that it took him a while to notice that Ludwig was no longer on him.

“Lu…Ludwig…” he called, reaching, trying to awake. By the time things could become solid in his vision, Ludwig was already near the exit, a hand on ancient jewels and encryptions. He had already begun a spell, whispered and not a word for Feliciano to understand from the distance. He glowed powerful, eyes shining in deeper reds with even darkness in between, symbols he had never seen on him began to glow and Feliciano knew he was working on something powerful.

“Wha-what?” He managed to sit up, to begin easy steps forward to him, but it was just as the entire room glowed in different ancient symbols, spreading all the way to the very dome, initiating…a sort of shield, coming down in quite a beautiful shade. Yet Feliciano trembled, fearing that it could fall upon him, a singular voice, sounding too similar like Augusta saying: ‘He’s doing it again…he’s doing it again!’

“What is he-” he found himself asking aloud, hoping perhaps Ludwig could explain this time, but as he turned to him, he noticed that Ludwig was now out the door, the symbols on him dwindling…only making sure that the shield came down as it should.

“He’s not…he’s not…”

“So on the day they were supposed to leave to fight, to be ready to face Keron near the field…Romulus refused Augusta to come along in deep fears of losing her…so…he used power of the validity spheres to keep her, along with their twins, locked in the Heartian palace so she wouldn’t come along and so she could stay safe.” Feliciano could clearly hear Elizabeta’s voice as she had once told it, realization coming, dashing, running, trying to get out before the field landed on the ground.

“Ludwig! Don’t! Stop this, stop it this instant!” He screamed, but it was useless.

“Don’t touch it!” Ludwig warned, but Feliciano clashed into it as it sealed. The shot was like lighting, burning strongly on the skin of his forearm despite the cover of his jacket. He fell and whimpered at the intensity of this pain, raising his sleeve to see a burning mark. Luckily nothing reached the jewels and vines, but it tainted and gave enough warning and mock over what just occurred.

“You didn’t…you didn’t…please tell me you’re not doing this…” he managed to beg as he set the wound aside, standing and looking forward, hoping for a sort of instant escape.

Ludwig just stood at the other side, the magic from the spell he just used still dwindling, but there was a determination in him that put enough blame.

“Ludwig…raise this shield now and let’s go back to the field!” He sounded hard even with hisses of pain, of more tears threatening, gripping his hands. Ludwig didn’t move.

“Ludwig!” Feliciano called out again.

Ludwig’s hand kept a shaking raise that made Feliciano think he was close to following, but he ended up forcing it away and continuing to stare him down with that decree.

“…No, I won’t.”

“Ludwig, please!”

“I cannot let you risk your life and our children’s’ like this.”

“It’s my duty!” He exploded in a scream that was almost maddened, unlike anything Ludwig had ever heard him in. “Even as I am bearing, it is prophesied that I am that one that has to defeat Khaos. You’ve seen me practice, you’ve seen how powerful I can be, you know I’m the only one who can stop him…” how he wanted to punch and kick with all his might at the shield, but the shimmering colors only reminded him more of the ache that could come. It only seemed to make the wound burn more.

“You have seen me prepare as well. We have read all the books we got from Khaos’s library and I have found out more about the dark magic I possess that could help me to single handedly defeat him. You don’t have to be put at risk…you don’t have to die…” there was so much hurt in those eyes, as if the very words had become true.

“Ludwig…” it was hard to soothe no matter how he tried, but he just had to make him understand, “I’ve seen the paintings and murals they did of what Khaos will become,

Augusta has giving me nightmares and the Clubian royals read to me the writings. They're terrifying and unlike anything we can expect or imagine. This alignment will be different, and he will surely turn into something more monstrous than what I've seen. Millions will die and all the kingdoms will surely perish if I'm not the one to stop it. Please don't let this happen! Let me out this instant and I assure you nothing will happen to me…I'll be safe, I'll…I'll…" with how worn and tearful he looked, he doubted he proved that image of strength he wanted to be.

Ludwig looked on with no changes, with even a turn ready to leave. "I'll deal with it…at whatever price." He began his paces to leave.

"You know what happened to Romulus after he did this exact same thing!" Feliciano shouted, broken, wishing that he didn't have to say it, looking above as if to stop the form of tears, as if trying to blind himself with the light and not see the images these words tried to implant on his mind.

Ludwig stopped, entering fully in the hall, as if he was already surrounded in the voids of death…but learning to be acceptive, expressionless and still.

"You said it yourself…things can be different this time."

"Not like this…not like this…" Feliciano was surely using magic to keep himself standing and from falling in pieces to the floor, the last look Ludwig had of him being anger, fear and shredding, holding to his cloak to cover himself from these constant shivers…from coming apart.

"Everything I have done and will do is for you…" the last words and he was off.

"What have I told you about trust! About believing in me!"

Ludwig continued.

"This will cause us our doom, Ludwig!"

Nothing.

"Ludwig, please, this time I can't go after you! Please come back! Please, please, please…"

By now Ludwig had rounded the corner and his vision was gone. Feliciano released the hold of his cloak, losing control, walking forward to the shield, testing his palm, feeling burning heat that felt numbed with each step he heard Ludwig take away.

"Ludwig! Ludwig! Ludwig!" He screamed to coughing, power began to burn in him and with the last call of his name, he surged and attacked the shield with the most potent of his fires… the shield only brightened in colors and nothing else.

"Get me out! Get me out!" His cloak was gone, most of his jackets were gone, trying to use as much space and extend of his body to use whatever powerful ace magic he possessed to crash against the shield. He heard the gears of the elevator moving upwards, and by now he

had become a beacon of pure red and fire light in constant battle. Even Ludwig could see the hellish glow round to his part of the hall, the last colors before he faced his ascend.

In desperation, in only agony and tension, Feliciano was taken by an impulse to take one of the near vases and swing. It exploded to pieces with the magic and it only gave him more a testing to throw pillars, shelves, towels, toys, curtains, even the bed, throws of powerful magic being combined with the destruction of any items in the room. He screamed, his throat hoarse, tears scared his face, the shield remained as it was, shouting at him warnings of what could come, warnings that beckoned him down, made him kneel and bow before the misery.

By the time Ludwig had reached the normal commute halls of the castle, he met with the others, waiting as desperate as he left them. They reached, already starting with their usual questions, but the most common ones: “Where is Feliciano?”

“The old birth room,” he admitted coldly.

“What is he doing there?”

“Should we get him?”

“I’m sure the coach can wait.”

“I’m leaving without him.”

“What do you mean?”

“Ludwig, I insist he goes.”

“I placed a new validity sphere shield.”

Silence, he walked on as the others halted, crashed with the intentions, slow to reach an action, letting Ludwig carry on to the exit.

“You cannot let this happen!” His grandmother was the first to rush in fury, a walk quick and deadly that seemed ready to execute.

“Ludwig, what are you thinking? You know the war needs Feliciano!” Aldrich joined his wife.

“You can’t expect to deal with this by yourself!”

“I am just as capable, and I prefer to not be underestimated at this moment. I will stop Khaos myself and Feliciano will not have to bring himself to the misery that can come if he were to fail.” He was out, the coach still in its wait. The joker Vikings who held it were also as questioning for the King’s return without his Queen.

“You are a fool yourself for underestimating Feliciano.”

“I’m only trying to protect him!”

“At the cost of the kingdoms!”

“I will not let that happen!” Ludwig in his anger, caught his grandfather by the collar, pulling him in such an ache that Aldrich feared some sort of lash. Ludwig, at noticing such release, breathed, letting his grandfather touch the ground again and moving aside, heading into the coach, command in his stare and signals to leave back to the field. Aldrich was left breathless at such an impulse.

“Ludwig…think about what happened to Romulus when he did this very thing…are you sure you want this to happen?” Louis said with a reached calm, hopeful yet, the rest joining in her raise, in their beg that Ludwig would give an answer that would mean his return to get his Queen.

The King remained, no movement, no vivacity. He only shut the door decided, leaving the rest in shaking fear, broken as if Khaos was right at the entrance of their city ready to inflict darkness.

“I’m willing to deal with whatever the consequences.”

The dragons began the lifting of their wings, the Vikings placing the necessary spells on the coach.

“The birthing room work as it used to. Anyone can walk in and out. You can see Feliciano if you wish…but I recommend you don’t do so this instant.”

The coach was off high in the skies, to the known distance that would lead to the Club Kingdom, back to the war, to what was to come, the stars above them coming closer and closer to their align. The near servants held to each other, whispers of death to come, some already whimpering, others beginning a lost of color, one that they had tried to glow red with hope, go grey. The former king and queen were desolate, nearing to each other with a hold that tried to comfort, forced to believe, but it was all like a goodbye, a horrible goodbye that tainted a future. Louis whimpered and fell herself, fearing that it could have been the last time she saw her grandson.

As they stared to those stars, they desperately hoped that history wouldn’t repeat itself. For the life of their king, things had to turn out different.

Chapter End Notes

I wish I had a joke since it's ch. 69...but I got none.

Chapter 70

Chapter Notes

Uh…I can explain.

I know, I know, it's been so long! It's the longest time I've left you all waiting for an update AND I REALLY WANT TO APOLOGIZE!!! These last few months were just extremely busy and there was just so much going on. It kept me away from the computer, but I managed what I could to squeeze something in each day. It didn't help that this chapter was so long either.

I can't promise that my next update will be quick…but just know that I will always try to update and that sometimes…well…it might take me months! BUT I WILL GET TO IT!

Anyways, here's a chapter that I wish you enjoy from!

Also, warning…I don't know what to exactly call this warning. I can say it's not rape, or too much blood…but there is…something that I don't know what a proper name for this warning can be.

So just uh…warning!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The field was still as battered, smoke still rose, wounded still bled and everyone still marched on in deadly preparation, a reign of fear strong even from the heights Ludwig flew in as they made their approach and descend.

Ludwig couldn't tell the time, he didn't even bother to know it, whatever it was…it couldn't change the fact that the alignment was now to come in two days. The knowledge weighted heavy on every single soldier's shoulders, slumped and looking like they were sinking themselves to the stricken lands of dirt and mud. Ludwig felt ashamed of how pristine he looked as he came out from the coach, if even his bandages, uniforms, and that he was wearing the same clothes that he took for leave. No one paid him attention, they all rushed between as they dealt with the preparations…for the alignment, all the final touches that made it surer and clear that it was there. They were to face one of the most monstrous things in their world, with less the men and women they had, many of their most powerful enchantments wasted or gone, and still many wounded that needed more time of healing to just stand.

"Ludwig!" He recognized Renata's call, reaching to him, colorful in this mass of decaying grey. Despite how bright she tried to remain, there was a deep tiredness in her eyes, an energy gone and her movements the slowest he had ever seen them.

“Renata, what has happened in my absence?” He was soothing in his worry for her.

“Nothing to report. We haven’t found Khaos and there has been no other attack from any of his men. We’ve searched everywhere but-” she noticed how Ludwig stood solitary, no other coming out from the coach. “Where’s Feliciano?” She peeked, hoping to find him seated in the coach. It was when Kiku arrived with his own hurries and reports, expecting to see Ludwig aided with his Queen, but Renata knew with the look he gave the coach…no one else was with him. His eyes asked Renata’s question again. Ludwig couldn’t look either in the eyes, couldn’t dare raise his head as he now felt the presence of the other royals and the brigade from the White Kingdom. Silence went on, for Ludwig hailing across the field, ready to point and blame when he opened his mouth.

“Feliciano is in Berlin…” he simply uttered.

“Berlin…why would he stay in Berlin?” Zuma was as confused as the rest.

“…I left him there…”

Heavy astonishment, their silence more piercing and dangerous.

“Ludwig…oh Ludwig…no…” Elizabeta reached the fear first, trembling, arms raising in the hope it could aid whatever tears or panic could show.

“Please…please do not tell me…” Roderich begged, nearing, his viola eyes in broken anguish.

The rest whispered as to the Clubian royals’ shaking reaction, not remembering the tale as well as these were heavily trained to know it word by word.

“Ludwig…where exactly did you leave Feliciano?” Ivan demanded with a Kingly tone, in the most fearsome Ludwig had ever seen him in.

Their own disarrays were now sealing into him, a weigh that was choking. Could he settle with silence? To letting it extend until they gave up and moved away. With the intense of their stares, in it enough will to remain for as long as possible, he heavily doubted it. He thought about running, escaping, wanting to be alone until the alignment, but with how crowded and covering they remained, no such exit would be possible.

“In the castle…”

“Where and how?” Elizabeta demanded.

“…old birthing chamber…under…”

“Under…what?” Roderich hoped he wouldn’t answer what all were terrified he would say.

“…validity sphere shield…this one induced with new magic…similar to the one Romulus used on Augusta.”

Collective groans, whimpers, buries in the palm of hands, cloaks, armors or even weapons. The Clubians held from reacting strongly by gripping their hands, trying to breathe, but one such royal could not take it in like the rest had done. In a brashness no one expected from such a collective and controlling man, came the attack of Kiku Honda. He punched his own King to the ground, his small frame towering, angry, vengeful, all were suddenly fearful of the peaceful Jack of Hearts. “How could you…how could you risk our entire world like this!” Kiku shouted in high tones he had most likely never touched, firing and ready surely for new attacks. They all had to be prepared to stop him, but Kiku gave Ludwig the chance to sit, to use a quick healing spell to aid with the bruise, breathing the only sound.

“Kiku, there might still be a chance…” Renata tried to desperately alight, holding Kiku gently by the shoulders, easing, wanting to clear hostilities. Antonio joined her in that hold, both changing glances of what to speak. Antonio dared to move forward, rather fearful in the steps he got closer, Lovino ready to defend at the worst outcome.

“Ludwig, we desperately need Feliciano. Things are not looking so good as they are, and Feliciano is our key, chance and hope for the rest of us. You have to bring him back. We have to act fast. The alignment is only two days away and we are depending on Feliciano’s lead.”

Ludwig’s answer was silent, finishing the healing spell that cleared the red from Kiku’s hit. He straightened, as postured as the rest, composed, a strong devotion in his expression that was powerful compared to the fear induced of the others.

“He will stay in Berlin.”

Many groaned, others whimpered, some tears fell and already they were crumbling.

“We will not accept this,” Vash shouted, his hold on his little sister dearer than ever.

“We will all die if this is your choice,” Roderich was of the many ready to be torn, body already shaking, trying to hide the peak of his desperation by burying it in the palm of his hand.

“I have it under control!” He shouted back to all. “I will protect the kingdoms.”

“Without any Ace power!” Alfred joined the disarrayed shouts.

“Without the person who is prophesied and is the sole one that can defeat Khaos.” Lovino had to really be held back, along with Kiku, he seemed ready to battle on the King of Hearts as well.

“Must I keep repeating that I have just as powerful magic that is capable,” Ludwig pierced with a strong point and stature.

“Will it be enough? …Will it truly be enough?” Yao questioned, of the few who kept his tone even.

The silence Ludwig took, how his eyes seemed to search for an appropriate answer, did nothing to assure the rest.

“I’m confident,” he ended up saying, “I know what I can do, and I am sure it can work.” It was enough to bring a sense of ease, but many were still dismayed, doubtful and already wearing defeat.

“Is there…really no way we can convince you to get Feliciano back?” Kandake came forward with another try, Abasi with a dear hold on her, for he felt her shake, her fear.

Ludwig gave it another thought, but he was decided and that strength of blue in his eyes solidified his choice. “No. He stays in Berlin. We’ll defeat Khaos without him.” He stood proud in this sea of dejection, many, very slowly, sighing and beginning to accept what outcome could arrive.

“So…what plan do you have now?” Gilbert could somehow smirk and cross his arms, ready in service despite how he was decorated in Joker symbols. It was the first time he had released himself in public as a Joker.

“What we’ve always had. For the alignment…I will face Khaos. Leave everything to me…” He said nothing else as he walked away, with news and checking to see if everything will be placed as he expected it to be. The rest he left down casted, unsure, no accept and still trying to think of ways they can disobey.

Nothing came plausible.

They needed to stay there and help in what had taken months to prepare, as well as Feliciano was trapped in a shield that they knew only Ludwig could open again. Going there to try and take him out would be a waste of time and effort.

They had to have hope in Ludwig, they had to believe he was solely capable, a mantra that they tried repeating in their heads to not lose all perseverance as they settled to work, only more darkened than they had earlier been.

The two maids, along with their pass queen, followed the instructions they were heavily taught to access the birthing chamber, with trays of food, new clothes, remedies, even a couple of sketch materials.

Two days have passed, but they kept addressing it as the day before the alignment. They decided it was well time to visit the Queen, hopefully passed on his reaction after being locked by his King. It was eerily silent as they reached the level, the hazed red colors, the round of the hall and the walls that separated the room the same ones they knew.

“Where’s the field?” One questioned, looking about hoping to see its shimmering colors. Louis shushed, wanting the composure she had explained, not wanting to startle Feliciano in surely the disarray he found himself in.

They walked the round of the hall in silent steps, high and ordered as if they were serving on an important feast. The glowing they had expected came, small from the red door Ludwig had left opened. They peeked, what little they could see already shown broken, splattered, in

pieces and burnt. They had to come in more to finally see Feliciano. He lay on the now torn bed, slanted in his fury, his back to the door, still, too still. They wondered if he was asleep, if truly his vengeance was gone. Was it safe to show themselves fully, for Louis to test a hand on the field, the magic accepting her passage, her coming, along with the two maids, who couldn't help the wonder. It was gone the moment they truly realized the utter catastrophe in the room. The colors were barely noticeable now, not a spot on the floor clear, not a single object whole, traces of all kinds of magic damaging the walls, showing new glimpses of the shimmer of the field, but it was still there, Feliciano was still trapped. He surely knew by now they were there, but still he did not react, a new movement how he curled himself more, trying to hide how he could.

"Feliciano…" Louis called, hoping the familiarity of her voice could cause either a reaction or a comfort, but she received no kind of answer to it. "We have brought some things for you." No turning. "We…need to check on the children." No words. Louis sighed, "Feliciano…you need company. You need to talk…it helps-"

"There's nothing you can do to help me," his voice finally filled, teared, unknowing, Louis almost couldn't recognize it, the shine of his tone, bright and always joyful, gone.

"What is it that you want?" Louis dared ask knowing well the answer, but whatever worked to get him to speak, to react.

"To get out of here…to save everybody…save Ludwig…I don't want to stay here and be useless…I want to protect my world and my children…" More tears were surely running down his cheeks, yet his voice carried on well without whimpers, surely used to this new agony.

It pained Louis to see and hear this, a breaking that made it hard for her to stand as postured as she usually did. The maids had long lost it, close to tearing and whimpering themselves.

"Feliciano…I know you want to and if I could grant you that, you would right now be fighting alongside everybody on the fields, but it's not in my power…"

"Then why are you here? I don't need anyone right now…"

"You do, you do so much, my dear…" like the caring grandmother she was, the one Feliciano never knew, she kneeled, making space for her to sit in what she could in the breakage of the bed. It took great amounts of bravery to extend a hand, to run them across the soft curls of an angered Ace, lean and provide a warmth that could momentarily forget, that could distract, but it was a grand opening to a cascade of pain that Feliciano had unknowingly kept to himself. Instead of the attack the maids were expecting, only whimpers and screams came, Louis accepting it all, not straining at the high shrills that had the maids moving back. It was unnatural, for them the room was surely shaking, but despite it, Louis kept her kind embrace and Feliciano dove himself more, finally turning, in her lap, coating the fabric in her dress in the puddles to come of tears. She kept her spread on his hair, another hand on his back, gentle, soothing, working its effect on getting Feliciano to slowly reach a steady breathing, letting an ease wash in the room, for the maids also to not feel so dizzy.

Louis pointed with her expressions to get them to leave the stuff where they could out of the debris and so they did with their usual pristine preparations as if it was in any other part of the castle. They remained for minutes on, watching as Feliciano fell silent again, reddened with tears still surely, but his voice lost the will to continue its shouts.

Louis sighed, her hands still on his hair, on his shoulder. She whispered, “is there really nothing that can be done?”

Feliciano shook his head like such a turn pained him.

“How did Augusta release herself that first time?”

“…when Romulus died…”

The maids shivered at the implications, while Louis had to breathe and settle her mind away from an image of a battered grandson.

“…Ludwig will do fine…”

“…he doesn’t truly know what he’s going up against…”

“…he has powerful magic himself…”

What Feliciano knew were words against everything she would surely say, words that had haunted him enough since the day before. He didn’t want them to circulate in the room, it was like it would only bring it more to life.

“…everything will be as it was before…”

“The circumstances are now different, Feliciano.” Louis’s tone had started to become scolding, implementing, as it was of her past position.

“How so?” He so desperately wanted to find.

“Ludwig holds Romulus’s soul. We know he will be affected by the alignment as well.”

“Implemented by Khaos…with Dark magic…”

“He studied it well, you were there with him to see it.”

“…he once attacked me with it…” he gave that harsh reminder…his side hurting, burning again as it once had.

“He…he-he….couldn’t control that! It just happened…I thought he had apologized enough to you.” “

He couldn’t control it…” was the only thing he could repeat…eyes with such dull darkness that Louis thought him lost again.

“Feliciano, please, this is not the attitude to have right now!” Her scold was truly high this time. “Where is your courage, your spirit, your trust?”

“Oh, Aces! Can’t you see where I’m stuck right now, Louis?”

“I don’t think this is the attitude you had when you got stuck in Khaos’s castle, or when you were trapped by his men, in the Washington invasion… or when you first came here…” he didn’t give a single reaction. “I know it’s hard…but whatever the problem was…you always made do…something always turned out for the better…I know there will be a way out of this…” she confided in such a way that cleared, a new light to shine upon the room that made it distant from the world. “But for now…there’s nothing I can do…but give you my faith.” She landed a kiss on his head, the last of the topic before they focused on mostly breathing, in getting Feliciano to eat, to change from the clothes he surely came wearing from the field and finally a quick inspection on the jewels. The twins were doing fine and Louis couldn’t keep the smile at the news, her caress dear and loving to the stones, accepting and already in love.

“We will come back daily about this time. Is there anything specific you want or perhaps someone you want to see?”

“I’m all right…the cooks know what I want…and I guess… I just want to see Augustino…” what an endearment, Louis decided she would make sure to bring the young boy if it got that elation from him.

“As you wish.” She clapped, signaling the maids to prepare their leaving. “Try to rest…and to think of the well being of your children…if anything there is an incantation symbol on the wall that you can use to call us if anything.”

“All right…” he sat down dejected, still as hopeless. Louis sighed, deciding that moment to do it, to take out the chest, the little golden one that Feliciano couldn’t ignore its glimmer from the corner of his eyes, reaching for it even before Louis brought her own extend.

“I hope it helps…” she left it dear on his hand before she turned, goodbye enough in her eyes, taking her passage through the field. She did the favor of shutting the doors, away and now Feliciano was alone.

She was right…he needed the company, but now he had none but the familiar gift on the palm of his hand. He didn’t waste a moment on opening, on letting the melody create that friend or lover he needed that moment, taking the leaning once again to the bed. Now he could cuddle into the chest, leaning into its sound, on inner magics that could connect to his heart so far away.

For now it was beating, Feliciano waving it to the music, keeping it open for as long as possible to make sure.

“…I only want your arms around me…” he sang in whispers, trying to keep up. “…I will keep it all in my heart…Never a fear to be lost…Never a fear to fall…” He was tired now, ever so close to slumber, but yet so attentive to the song. “And a queen breaks at her lover’s parting again…” He desperately hoped the song could play on even in his sleep.

Sharp, sharp, sharp, sharp, he wanted it the sharpest it had ever been. Had he worn away the silver? Did he endanger the red and goldened handle?...But was it sharp enough?! He brought down the filer again, with strong intensity that could have easily broken, if it was any other but the King's sword.

This is how Ludwig dealt with the stress that morning, how he welcomed the impending of the alignment and how he would surely spend it until he was called to take the position that had been waiting for him for months. No one bothered him and he was ready to lash at anyone who even dared to come close enough to his tent.

"Beatorum praesto persecutionis," he kept repeating. "Nos autem nunc vivo in." They were words from one of the dark books, written by Khaos himself, the changes Ludwig made but translating them to the old Heartian language in the hopes of not letting the magic be too indulged in darkness. Despite it, he felt great evil rummaging through him, coding him in what terrified him in ruin, but it was powerful, it was brandishing his sword well, it was strengths that made him believe.

"Ludwig…" Kiku introduced himself as gently as he could, entering still with caution. "You should come…I believe soon it shall start."

"How do you know?"

"Look to the sky yourself." This was the moment he stood and brandished the strictly prepared armor. It was the envy for surely any knight or soldier, shields of protection that heightened his stature and girth. It was black, with beautiful reds and golds in symbols that proclaimed him Heartian and King. It took him some minutes to prepare it, all the while Kiku just stood by the door watching, Ludwig knew still with blame, holding himself from anymore words of venom, but with the real time to fight so close, the less they needed was another argument.

Ludwig was ready, enchantments well on him, sword, shield, all the spells memorized in his head, he was to head out and face whatever uncertain future was coming.

The ones there were all the royals, the leading members of the White Kingdom, Feliciano's family members as well in his own. They were all in their own imperial armors, standing unique each in their color and magic, angered, but with powerful vengeance that Ludwig knew would serve well. Abasi was the one to point high with his spear, Ludwig following it as it headed directly to a peculiar line of stars. The sky, despite the grey of the dwindling smoke and pest of the air, was still bright with dashes of blue for the morning, so it was surprising to see these groups of lights shine so brightly into their sky despite. Everyone, even with the heavy burden to come, were awed but both appalled at such universal mystery.

"They can be nothing else," Ivan reminded, with touches of tremble in his voice.

Ludwig nodded and began easy breathes.

The rest of the camp was both oddly silent and active. Everyone was working and preparing, heading to their stands, already a group at the edges of the wrecked Khaos castle ready to try the first of the alignment attacks. There had been no spotting of Khaos since the last reveal, but everyone expected that he would be by his castle the moment the stars placed themselves.

"…this is terrifying…" Kiku dared to omit, with such stillness in his face that it betrayed his words, but he couldn't show to back down.

"Courage…" Ludwig reminded, having to be the pillar, looking up and trying to hold the entire field's hope. "We will prevail…"

It was hard for the rest to agree, but they nodded, strengthening their protective shields and maintaining their breaths.

"Now…the Oralee are at the outskirts. Rosangeliz has sent me messages that they are ready to hold out. Emanuel has informed me that they have their messengers ready to act…and Nina that she has her chain ready to call for evacuation on the towns at the edges of the radius. Yao, send your Spadian squadron to aid them for the worst outcome." Ludwig began moving along and settling.

Yao nodded and headed his direction to work.

"The Vikings will take the air. Abasi, Kandake, go with Pookie and your people to join them. Do you know the silence spell?"

"We are trained and prepared. Luck, your majesty!" Abasi called lastly, taking their winged companions, Pookie following as obedient, if even constantly looking backward in the case his master came.

"Arthur, join your brothers in keeping the protection spell. Let Zack and Ralph know we'll be counting on them for the backups."

The Queen of Spades rushed.

"Francis, Vash, Lili, keep the gates." Meaning the flow of men and women that were to come and fight from all over the kingdoms. They had learned well the strengths of all their men grouped and rode off together in one of their large feathered battle birds, unperturbed.

"Elizabeta, Roderich, are you prepared for the holding chant?"

"My men and women have everything."

"Join them, give them confidence."

They nodded and went.

"Ivan, are you sure you want to leave your sisters at the face of battle?"

"I know their abilities, they will do well."

“And are you sure you want to stay with them?”

“Positive. We will hold.” Ludwig didn’t have to command him in his leave.

“Alfred, cannons ready?”

“I can’t wait to blast them!” He was the only one with pure excitement as he ran off.

The only ones by his side now were Kiku, Feliciano’s family and many other Heartian soldiers of honor. They will not leave his side he knew, no matter what commands he gave them. They were brandished and ready to face the most difficult, in what they knew was their place in what would be this battle. Ludwig sighed in acceptance, taking a glimpse to the sky…only a single star missing, nearing its place…nearing the alignment.

There was one thing he needed to make sure, voice loud to all who were there, hoping the words could spread and reach even the furthest extend of their people. “Do not fear,” he impended, wanting the words to be written across the sky if they had to, “the writings mention how only his image was enough to break upon many. Don’t let him reach you all like this. Stand strong. We are powerful, we will not be doubted or undermined. If we are to go down, we went down showing the best of our power and the creeds of our kingdoms. We will not give him the satisfaction of making it easy. We will strike our own fear.”

“For the kingdoms!” Kandake shouted from her top in the skies, the power in her hands shinning to alarm all, and a wave of shouts and cries went along.

“For Pisa!” Zuma joined her.

“For our people!” Elisa shouted from her ground, joined by the Amazonians.

“For Augusta and all the Aces!” Meimei, such a meek figure impotent with her own magic.

“For a future!” Sadiq commanded on, starting waves in his reach of the field.

“…for Feliciano…” Ludwig whispered it to himself, turning away from his men and focusing on continuing the path set…to the very center, the castle of ruins were he was surely being waited for.

There was no commotion for him, everyone else was too determined in their own part, they only gave them but space, and perhaps a good luck wished in a foreign tongue. Ludwig swore the missing star was following his path, inching ever closer, already a burning, unfamiliar, felt to all, beginning on their earth.

Feliciano groaned that morning, pushing aside the number of the day, only feeling the beat of his beloved still ringing. He turned, he looked high above only for what he wanted to see be blocked by the glass and light of the dome.

He felt nothing of its ignition.

It was odd, how his blood boiled, but it was in unfamiliar magic, nothing of what the books mentioned, but Ludwig could identify darkness.

He had it, it was his, there was nothing to worry about, he headed on.

He wondered if any of the others felt such power, but all they talked about was feeling this heat and energy below them, but not from within them.

Feliciano stood, he paced, he tested small spells…it was only the usual.

They all reached the head, with the most guarded and armored soldiers, surely the most anguished, yet it wasn't shown. Their weapons were brandished, their magic was the highest they could get it to and they were ready to turn, to shout and attack at what was surely the image of the worst of nightmares.

The hills that surrounded the castle, long free of the limits of the field, had been equipped with their biggest nuclear weapons, men and women already at their handles, flags, different powerful and beautiful creatures screeching already what seemed victory, decorating and gating view to the debris and embers of the castle, well destroyed in the last days of battle. The edge was there, Ludwig met with Ivan and his two sisters, they only nodded in quick welcome, their eyes back to the ruins quick…and nobody was there, only silence, blackened bricks and smoke.

"Are you sure this is the place he will receive the alignment?" Yekaterina, the eldest of the Braginsky siblings, asked, fretting, her eyes never leaving the spot, not daring to miss a single object out of place.

"It has to be," Ludwig was sure…he could feel it in the intense as his blood continued to pump, a new burn that he tried to keep at bay, ignoring its pang.

"Then why is he not here?" The younger, Natalya, demanded, shown furious at not seeing his presence.

"The alignment hasn't really started," Reinhardt added in the hopes of clearing any tensions.

"He could have showed some sense of welcome into it though," Gilbert was agitated for it to start already.

"The star is coming ever closer," Lovino kept a glance. It showed on how smoke began to arise from Ludwig, surely from these new burns, a worry to all, but Ludwig stood ignorant to it as he continued to wait for his enemy.

Feliciano had paced every spot of the room, hoping to be bathed with this light that might give him…something. Yet all remained as it was. He had given up and reclined himself to sitting on the bed, staring at the jewels that would be his children, omitting a smile.

I'm going to be all right…your father is also going to be all right.

To many, the star looked already placed, but Ludwig could see that it was only but minutes as it truly wasn't in its rightful order. He looked up to make sure, an alighting now starting that brightened, made some tremble and move back from the Heartian King. When he looked down, Ludwig couldn't escape the added presence, the man siting between the many of the ruins, his clothes, the dark elegance that was more fit for a ball or feast than a battlefield. His robes and capes flew about with a new breeze, smiling, comfortable, a cocky lean as if he was simply admiring any view but the collective wrath and decree of war from an entire world.

"He's here…" Ivan had to remind, for many looked on to him wondering if it was even Khaos, with his placid state and being completely alone. He too was shinning with magic as did Ludwig, his smoke looking evil…but then again…there was also an edge to darkness for Ludwig as well.

The star was to be placed now but seconds away.

Feliciano gripped his hands and could do nothing but pray to the Aces.

Khaos stood, men raised their weapons, those who had major weapons already targeted, those on the furthest reach began their running for when the other parts of their plan were to take place. Khaos slowly began a reach forward, slow, but how he loved how some already moved back.

Feliciano felt how Ludwig's heart quickened, he didn't know if magic or fear, yet there was something different in there…something that he rather not feel from Ludwig. It made him tremble, shiver, repeating those words of comfort.

The star came, the alignment was placed, and Khaos welcomed it with open arms, as if wanting to embrace the armies, but from that embrace, came sudden jets of black, sticking to the ground. They remained in the crater of his old palace, but one dared into the people. They all moved just in time to not be pierced from it. Some already tried cutting or disintegrating with spells, but no matter, their attacks just bounced off and left this dark pillar as it was.

More kept sprouting as Khaos came closer, with each, another shake to the ground, some protruding from uncomfortable areas of Khaos vessel. The side of his face, his head, his ankle, his hip, but yet it was no weigh, nothing stopped his evil grimace and forwarding.

“Move back…” Ludwig whispered, everyone in the vicinity moving as followed, leaving Khaos to grow more of these pillars, taking more space, the ground now unstable and many had already tripped. They gazed and looked to Ludwig for any new sign…now he blazed in smoke and light, the blue of his eyes heightened, the colors of his uniform now blended in white, but he didn’t dare release yet…he knew he would need much more, for now he was leveled with his people, making sure they would all be safe in this crucial first part.

More the ground shook, more dark pillars kept raining on them, taking more space, growing higher, thicker, more of Khaos’s vessel was left unseen, now a blackened empty puppet that hanged rather atrociously from its awakening place.

“Keep moving back!” Ludwig called.

There was a new rumbling, felt upon all the field, a reach, a wind, a coming, that Ludwig knew Khaos was creating.

“Begin the backup shields!” Ludwig called out.

“Now?” Vincenzo shouted.

“It’s still too early!” Kiku reminded.

Now they all had to shout, the wind, the shake, now too potent for their voices.

“Do as I say!” The growl, a tone with power that brought immediate shivers. They all looked worriedly among each other, but in the end, not daring to disobey this new form Ludwig was being born into, Renata gave the signal, a raise of the hand with light that told Vash from above. There was question and doubt, but he passed over the signal to the long distance.

The two in charge of the backup were disturbed, but followed, others at their side preparing suddenly to help.

A dark smoke began to arise, all corners, even to those who waited at the outskirts of everything. Because of its sense of uneasiness, Zack and Ralph couldn’t help the tremble in their voices, the spell many times failing. The smoke was intensifying, with every shake the ground gave, it became more liquid, solid, a flooding beginning that streamed between all their feet, the hoofs of their beasts, the base of the longest weapons, causing falls, some sticking and not being able to stand again, thus worsening the screams and shouts.

“The back up! The back up!” Ludwig called, for those at the very front took the worst, this filling already drowning bodies completely.

Zack and Ralph managed enough focus, and so finally their power gleamed, spread and enunciating with other dependents of the spell. All soldiers began glowing in different kingdom colors, light enough to pierce this darkness, to stand, to breathe, to let this stream

pass them well in safety. The spell elongated and lite up until reaching the Heartian King, the spell giving him slight color to his whitened form, still in control, in lead, but held.

The darkness came together, higher, reaching the winged ones, now fortified with their spell, thus they could stand above all as beacons. It was now above them as a large, large, dark blanket, with a hollow sound that brought powerful winds, many falling, crying, not taking the heavy screech, the utter blackness that came, but others were there to help in standing, with words to keep them yet strong on facing.

It all was wrapping a single center, tightening a towering figure, one that Ludwig was the nearest to, not at all unfazed. He had his sword, he had spells ready, he would attack singlehandedly if he had to, for many of those who had stood around him were now too far back to really depend on.

“Get further back!” He called, swinging his sword and with a new echoed deep voice with the insistence.

Khaos would take a large space he knew, and he wanted all away from what would surely be his foot.

Before him came what seemed like the rise of a mountain, the darkness that came from all around them filling it higher and higher. Here were the most intense of the winds, those in the first line finding it hard to keep their ground, having to use spells or weapons to keep them in the area. It was more difficult with the constant shake, the heavier darkness falling, painting the sky in what looked like the most intense of storms.

A glow of white, like thunder and lighting, joined in the strike, runes, symbols and other letters decorating with a crack across the mountain that continued to go upward. Even from the far distance Ludwig had reached, as well as several of his men and women took, they still felt a burn from it, hurting and dangerous. Luckily, they had spells prepared for this particular dark magic and so no one had disintegrated under its white light as surely it must have happened the first time.

“This is nothing!” Gilbert had shouted, with his hair flying all over the place, a hand holding tight to a beam he created to keep him from sliding to the ground.

“Ludwig! The Sloane cannons!” Lovino shouted in reminder, pointing to the keepers who already had their aim.

“Not yet!” Ludwig responded with a more immense voice.

The mountain continued to grow, surely reaching to a stomach, chest, elongated arms, coming down as if to lay upon the ground.

They moved back and back, all clear to see the last the main form would take, a head and face, an orb flowing with darkness for hair, falling and moving about with the intense wind that continued. It was dormant, faceless, seeming to rest as it took the last of the energy it picked from the area.

Suddenly all ceased, the wind was no more, there was a minimum light from the surviving sky and all looked hopeful, their weapons and magic at a rest as if expecting all to be over. Ludwig never kept his guard down, wary of the tranquility this giant presented for now.

Eyes of white opened, then a cracking grin, long, growing, and there was a pierce. It shouted its welcome of rebirth, a roar demanding, cringing and truly monstrous. It sent a wave that continued to shake, with harvested wind that had the soldiers pained at such a chilling sound.

“I will surely have nightmares after this,” Kiku commented after that first initial scream, but what Ludwig liked was the indifferent tone and watch, unperturbed to fight. He will come forward at the first attack.

“Let us at least make that after,” Vincenzo stood ready.

“Ludwig, what now?” Antonio awaited.

Ludwig glowed in white still, intense, held up, a hidden deity that they were all slightly fearful to get closer to, afraid to be in his area of vengeance.

“Tell the Oralee to begin evacuation of the next towns immediately…for the next command of evacuation…everyone in the Club Kingdom has to leave.” The echo in his voice was unrecognizable, it was truly the depth of gods.

“Everyone in the Club Kingdom?” Natalya startled.

“Ludwig, this is the largest kingdom of the four,” Renata felt like she had to remind.

“And I want it empty if something worst is to happen.” Anger like thunder.

They all didn’t dare utter anything else, trembling now for two imposing figures.

“We have to keep him here…if not…we cannot let him leave the Club Kingdom.” They all bowed and Ludwig was sure it was to be fulfilled.

Khaos’s new build stood with no action, only a loud rhythm of breaths that made him just as intimidating as his roar, as will surely be his attacks.

Ludwig focused on the breaths of this new body, with it, trying to meet it, to read into all the power it held… that he could use, that he could walk forward with, confident of its strength.

In a terrifying movement, a single sway of the head at this enormous top, reminding everyone that this monster was alive, Khaos met his gaze with the tiny lighted figure of Ludwig coming. He smirked an evil grin, menace to swallow all. Ludwig didn’t let himself be bothered, he stared up to him without a tremble, fears extinguished with the light he moved with. He came at the most intimidating front he could take, near his base, surely an easy spot to be embraced completely in this dark fortress of power, yet he bared anger, shield enough that didn’t even let Khaos instantly attack, only staring, a continuing face of what was to be dealt with.

Ludwig had his own roar, his own commence, a shrill with a bang, a light that circled and seemed to bless the entire ground, one that wasn't as fearsome as Khaos, his armies being able to stand and watch in belief. Already it shriveled darkness and made it disappear, Khaos joining in another shattering shout his pain and decree that this was not all he could do, and it was only but a piece and the true start.

Large arms lounged and came for their first attack, aimed to the largeness of people. Ludwig raised his King sword and cut with another large light attack, with fire, with burn, beautiful, enough to weaken the aim, so everyone could prepare their own blast against it.

"Charge!" Ludwig shouted moving forward to attack what he could of Khaos center, with same rings that he hoped could help weaken.

A group of the heart and spade kingdom slashed and threw at that hand that landed, not fearing to climb, to stab, even bite and try out the magic they could. Abasi led those who were winged to direct similar ring light spells that Ludwig used at Khaos side, in the safest vicinity they could take, enough for Khaos to be annoyed, distracted. The jokers of the diamond kingdom, ran and cleared what they could of the darkened ground, moving more people forward to take whatever Khaos swung. Mathew, prince of Spades and Alfred's younger brother, lead a group that held smaller Sloan cannons, beginning a roar of bombs, of smashes into the darkness.

It was only but pinches, but good enough to keep his gaze and arms busy, inconveniences that led to Ludwig being able to do more of his magic, now a wrap of power to constrict and detain, flying high in a rush that the King had to admit was glorious and made him feel unstoppable.

Herakles had managed to lead men from his islands to join at the front, adding strength and weapons when others fell, Alfred now declared other cannons to fire, Yong with his lead stopped large scaled magic from even hitting the ground. Elisa did well in commanding a special spell that was like drumbeats, a shake to keep the many tails Khaos called to shrivel or head away from their aim. Sadiq was there to help and strengthen whatever weapons seemed to weaken, adding his strength to the power of others. Yao, with some the Spadian squadron, helped to direct, defend, protect, worried for his family and all that were in his near care.

Khaos surely had to be confused at such action, all his attacks were failing, more of the armies were moving forward, a great symphony, ordered, successful and with more a push for victory.

Despite losing so many in the first wave, the weakness, even without Feliciano, all was working as it should, Ludwig could feel Khaos shrink under him, even as he moved over large terrains of body that could be their own land.

They will achieve, Khaos will go down, easy without even having to leave the old territories of the field. Ludwig could go from this moment to live his normal ruling. He could already see himself going back to Feliciano triumphant, there to help him in his next stage of bearing, to be there for his coming children, to continue to see a prosperous Hearts, with new hopes for the future. Yes, it all seemed to bright and wond- this is not enough.

He faltered at the deepness of this voice, human, gentile. It wasn't from around him, he was too far from the others, it couldn't possibly be Khaos as it was silent even if Ludwig could hear it clearly.

As spells continued to work around him, ones he should be aiding in spreading, Ludwig stopped in search for this call, but nothing shone responsible or solitary.

Forget this, he should be joining his people, he looked up, he should- this is not enough.

Again, from nowhere.

This is but the beginning, this is but a trap.

Ludwig angered at it, scowling at a distance, proving it wrong by continuing his force.

You should have listened to me.

Ludwig called binding ropes, tall to reach his height of the sky. He will capture Khaos all around it and make it the more difficult for him.

The voice was wrong.

You should have been done with him when you entered the field the first time as planned.

"Silence!" Ludwig shouted, a sign for the spell, as he had the base of the ropes, titanic and large, his figure small as he kept the base. Kandake raised and ignited, with the others, joining in the already intense of the alignment on Ludwig, a glimpse that slightly burned them as they helped to let the rope grow, engulf the largeness, cover it until almost the darkness had completely disappeared.

"It's working! It's working!" Elizabeta had called triumphantly, smiling widely and already thinking it over.

It was a contagion many couldn't resist, some already shouting in acclaim.

Ludwig flew away, getting perch in Pookie, who stared on doubtful but waiting. The animal nodded in Ludwig's welcome, but then returned his vision quickly on the cocoon, prepared to still continue the fight.

Ludwig desperately hoped it could hold, that it could disintegrate. This was a spell from Pisa, one that writer had seen the past goddess do herself on that alignment long ago.

She had died that time, the voice said, but Ludwig scoffed, intensifying his energy to make the ropes more constricting.

It will work, it will work, it will work, it will work… the energy just suddenly didn't…it was like it was taken directly from Ludwig's hand.

"Take cover!" Priya shouted, desperate, surprised as if she hadn't had visions of all this occurring before. Luckily all headed, and so many managed to protect themselves as the rope

of light seemed to be sucked back into darkness, a last evil grin from the monster before it exploded it all around. A boom, intense enough to cease hearings, of waves of wind, rush, burn. Many were surely sent flying, others ran…and others fell at its intensity. Ludwig and Pookie were part of the many who were thrown to the mountain, blinded and shocked. As others tried to stand, some needing instant medical attention, others trying to understand what happened or where they even were, Ludwig knew he had to stand and act quick, for Khaos could take advantage. The first thing he noticed the towering monster do was dive and reach for a group of Diamonds led by Gupta, defenseless as they tried to help one of their own from bleeding their life away. Ludwig ran against it, not feeling the usual human pang of tiredness, the power of the alignment granting him the speed and action he needed to raise his sword and swing against the ray of darkness that could have landed. Khaos moved back enough for the lingering shadow to be away.

“Get the wounded and leave! Just leave!” Ludwig commanded loud, quick before he had to turn to Khaos, who came back for another grasp of kill in his hands. Another large light ray of magic, moving with the handle of Ludwig’s sword, so ginormous and great that many were stupefied at its beauty.

“Get out!” He had to remind, or else they would stay and endanger themselves more.

He continued these attacks until he made sure that the perimeter of where he now blazed was empty, all held back to continue their own attacks from the distance. Alfred and Mathew awaited commands as well as good signs to know if they could go on with firing. Ludwig gazed about the area in a small break of breaths, sighing at knowing that it was as desolate as he wanted. The fact that he was alone now seemed to make the crooked grin grow more, huffing, trying to blurt out a laugh.

Ludwig would rid it. He had the alignment, he had to make use of it. As Khaos had called for darkness to liquid the grounds, Ludwig had his own, a call that brightened him more, looking simple as waves of lights came in the largeness of the radius. They tried to rid of whatever darkness Khaos was using for energy, a good surrounding that could cover again. Khaos was ready to tear it apart easy, but just as it was ready to flood him, instead, it suddenly halted, and with a fierceness in the raise of Ludwig’s arm, it instantly attacked in solid spikes across him. He screeched in pain, immense and terrifying, the soldiers in the back cringing. In what Khaos could, he repeated the action, in direct to Ludwig, who still so small, was able to easily wind pass them, not a scratch, not at all perturbed, he continued to fly above, calling pillar upon pillar to pierce.

Nothing will work, the voice said, and Ludwig had to agree with it, it was like Khaos had gotten used to them and he yet still managed to continue his own magic against the king.

Something different, something from another arsenal of his magic.

Don’t, the voice again, for it knew what it was he was thinking, but Ludwig had seen it work before, he had practiced it, he was sure of its mastering, with the alignment, it could be the deadly he wanted.

You once hurt your own Queen with this spell.

Couldn't it just disappear? Couldn't it go away and let him deal with this by himself. He had a plan, a quick glance to Alfred, who, along with a mix of Spadian and Heartian soldiers kept and protected well the Big Sloane, unused still in the battle. He couldn't shout it and risk letting Khaos hear…luckily they had planned on secret messages to pass long ago. He omitted a golden ring, a large one with fire, insignificant to Khaos, but Alfred had read the message clear. He responded back an equal blue one that meant he understood and will act at the next signal.

This was it, this had to be what will work.

Feliciano felt the agitation, the peek, it could barely let him breathe, the small room adding in constriction.

Ludwig had to continue to distract him with the white pillar pierces, Khaos each time becoming more adept in his avoidance, making it more difficult for Ludwig to keep his aim and to even gain the energy to try out the next dark magic. By now, Ludwig depended on what the armies threw forward from afar, despite how everything burned easily by many of Khaos's dark ribbons.

The smaller Sloane cannons worked again, firing in aid, and Francis, in a rather surprising waring burst, came forward with a wild shout, disheveled with no glitter to make him recognizable, with his people calling forth shots of lights, large ones to compare to Ludwig's own pillars, a spell that worked with the combine efforts of the people Francis had.

Perfect, this was the space he needed to call forward, to concentrate and call the darkness within him.

Be wary…the voice was a faint whisper this time.

"It's going to be all right, it's going to be all right," Feliciano whispered to himself, biting tears away, caressing at the jewels as the closest he could to some comfort.

Ludwig had the perfect spot, he had a clear watch, everything before him brightened to make the perfect finishing attack.

He touched magic of the universe, he touched the darkness within him, all paved like a well-known route. He had made his way, practiced and could make it the grandiose no one was expecting. Both his arms outstretched, as if holding the largest of bows and with concentration, a large pour came easy. He had taken Feliciano's advice on creation and art, a mental brush bringing the intricacy and form of this weapon, darkening dust coming and

enlarging, a giant by his side, many soldiers and the holders of the cannons stilling in awe, reverence and terror.

Ludwig waited until it was in complete formation, the structure one proud and confident despite the dark colors it was painted with. Then began the charge, a matter of darkness that he ignited from his center, making it grow and intensify with the weapon, the magic spreading all throughout, different corners working to make different charges that made lightning, made tremors, some soldiers who had managed closeness, running back to safety, ready for a new protective spell.

What was coming next would be grand and dangerous.

The only quick signal Ludwig gave, was a specific small lightning bolt, with it, he freed, he fired, and Alfred timed it well so the Big Sloane could join in it. The protective spell was shouted as warning and just as quick, it all exploded in white, force and destruction. It ate all around to nothing, many who were not quick enough to wear the spell, disintegrating in fury fire and burn. The roar and extend went on, far into the long-forgotten forest, whatever trees that had stood through the last battles, gone, the village of Tiksi disappearing easily, those who were there, only but messengers or healers with other soldiers that needed attention, depending on the spell to save them from this blow.

The center of it all still roared with energy, Ludwig trying to keep the attack so it could continue its power. He was the only one who managed to stay standing (well, he was floating in this power still), no spells, only but his sear defense given to him by the alignment. It was able to give him a presence in the middle of this rapture, a slow of time, of nothing, only but white, silence and a sureness that kept him elevated. Nevertheless, he continued the pierce of his large weapon, feeling a body that kept sinking it, and so with a force of anger and frustration, he pushed and aided with however deep Ludwig had to carve this deadly wound.

There was a sudden hold at the bottom, Ludwig could feel large hands taking it, not pulling or moving it out of its place, it only seemed to tighten it, as if trying to destroy it by the mere force in the grasp of his monstrous hands. It failed and it surprised Ludwig that Khaos did not do more.

Perhaps this was working…perhaps this was vanquishing. Ludwig, even if he couldn't properly see it, felt the grin, a crack like earthquake every time, a heavy wave that heated with fires ready to engulf.

How was Khaos possible at this even after one of the mightiest attacks?

"Charming that you almost believed…" echoed his old voice, calm, unfitting to his new form, in this state of frozen time.

Suddenly the air was choking, there was constriction in his muscles, his grasp slowly disappeared, the pain too much to keep holds.

"For a long time, you have been mine, boy…"

Ludwig could feel a flood, coming up to him.

“For a long time, you have been what I am…”

He was not, he was not, he was not! He kept repeating to himself, but it was somehow unheard, he couldn’t move, couldn’t fight as this flooding came closer, as it grew, as it spun around him, analyzing and filling before it lounged.

It was an attack, a pierce, unlike any Ludwig had ever suffered before. It plunged throughout his whole body, gripping and straining, in turns that he knew was shredding his body to pieces. He tried any kind of defend, any kind of raise to stop it, but it kept itself sealed as it took him, as it spread, as he slowly felt sinking to a deep nothingness. Breaths were dwindling, it seemed to cease even his chance to speak, to see. There was no air, no assurance, no chance.

“It’s time to show, what I have grown inside you for centuries,” Khaos introduced.

It was the last he heard, it was the last reach before he was dropped to a place where control, action and thought was no more. Gone he was…only a whisper in this void asking for his beloved, for Feliciano…and Feliciano felt a rip, something by force completely stripped away, no preparations, no mercy, it was just gone. A large part of him suddenly empty, with it leaving a burn, pain to have him screaming to the tops, a wail so intense it had the force to completely eradicate the now weak shield, the slim glass falling upon him and he did not care how it rained on his body, how it piled and added to the adjusted ruins.

It was nothing, nothing compared to this!

Another shout shook the ground beneath him, the castle joining in his sorrow with its small crumble.

The air was cleared, Kings and soldiers hesitant in the way they raised their eyes, hoping, hoping desperately that they would meet nothing, only but the Heartian King triumphant…… but he was not there. Khaos was, with his still sickening grin, the same large intimidating form, with the marks that now seemed more intense, new carved runes and even a new width that made him claim more of the area. Many of course trembled and dropped, but others were still searching for the one King.

“Ludwig…Ludwig…where’s Ludwig?” Kandake frantically searched for any trace, Pookie with her in the same look out…but the animal had an inkling that didn’t tremor well, a whimper, a howl…a farewell.

“Ludwig…Ludwig!” Renata called, a loud alarm that made many realize, a hoping for his appearance, but no matter how long they stared…their beloved king never showed, never arose from rubble or came with new light ready to battle on.

“Please…don’t tell me…” Arthur, like everyone else, was afraid to word what was becoming clear, a reality that made them all fall, tainted with the fear that only fed the still standing Khaos more, their desperation making livelier his smile.

“What do we do?” Young Soo turned to Cheng, hoping instantly for new commands, attacks and magic to blast, to try again. Cheng only trembled, all his words but stutters.

“We just used one of the most powerful weapons we have, and the Heartian King is nowhere to be seen,” Gupta answered for him, close by as he had been aiding.

It was just then that there was a new pulse, a new vibration across the land that brought silence once again.

“Arm yourselves! Be ready!” Carlos shouted to the men surrounding him, knowing they shouldn’t let themselves be surprised, especially now. They kept their magic and weapons close to themselves, ready to act, but all their gazes were distracted on this new presence, on finding it as it continued to just be an air around them.

“What do we without Ludwig?” Neeraja turned to Kiku, who was just as petrified and lost as all.

“I…” what other plans did they have that didn’t depend on Ludwig or Feliciano? What weapons they haven’t used? What hidden spell have they yet to try? Kiku couldn’t provide an answer to all these new stares as whatever came to life around them began to grow, the form of a new figure, of dark matter that brought more a shake, more darkness and even a poisonous air. It was sure to tower as Khaos, it was sure to kill and destroy, it was sure to aid the Dark King in fulfilling the end of the world, becoming more the high possibility.

Some already dropped their weapons in defeat, some fainted, others even ran away from the field. The royals stayed, battered, worn and tired, but aimed their weapon and magic ready to fight on, as their defined duty for their kingdom. Other few joined…many already decided that this perhaps could be their last day, brave on facing it, at least they knew they did it trying to protect what they could of their world. They tried to stand strong even as heavy gushes came, dusting the grounds, many loosing sites of their companions, yet they were still decided on fighting, the colors of their kingdom color and magic shinning bright in this haze.

“We advance how we can, fight and defend as we have done…we cannot give up now,” Yao replied, an impossibility as the wind grew stronger, as it spun upward adding more form for surely the monster to come. Soon, a large arm, darkened with flecks of red, arose from this turret of wind. It was immense, the shape of human muscles adding to its ferocity, much more define and surely powerful than the slimmer of Khaos. It had encryptions unknown and it was slow as it tested this new air it was feeling for the first time. They couldn’t underestimate it, their magic as powerful and never ceasing for whatever calmness they thought they could take.

“…send the messengers to start evacuating the Club kingdom,” Lili was immediate in the command, a message that was well passed, the assigned soldiers already heading off to start.

The wind was coming down, even if there was still a rush, one that kept their hairs sticking out and their poses as ready to fire.

“Stay strong!” Pedro commanded over the people in his proximity.

The rush was gone instantly and then there was a pounce, large boulders of darkness falling upon them all. They brought storm of lightning and fire to spread, thick and ferocious, a monstrous roar rampaging behind it all, quick and continuous. His ever-ringing roars and earthquake thumps against the ground, crowned him in battle, in an entrance to the apocalypse.

This was the monster that Khaos will puppet to bring about life to an end and already it seemed successful in its welcome.

Feliciano showed that defeat laying as if wounded in bed, the suffocation, the tears, the utter defenseless of this new emptiness keeping him tied, his shouts and wails the only he could utter as he tried to find a reach, tried to find something of his King.

Empty, nothing, gone, gone, gone, this ailing gone that only made stronger the hurt. No matter how deep he tried to find, there was no trace of the lively magic that was Ludwig. His essence, his fire, was extinguished, a sign that Feliciano wanted to desperately believe was not, gripping, kicking, screaming the more to deny it. His prayers begged the Aces that this was not the outcome, that he was there, that he just need help in finding him again, but no answer came, even Augusta was dormant, only but a hum of a forgotten lullaby.

My sun, my moon, my land, my love…
The sky has all fallen…
The kingdom weeps their king's farewell…
And a queen breaks at her lover's parting again…

The song tried to raise him, but Feliciano ignored and pushed it away, only letting it ring more in reminder.

History began a fulfill of repetition. A route was set to play, and now, we see if it all falls the same way it once did.

Chapter End Notes

Uh…I can explain.

Chapter 71

Chapter Notes

I am personally glad that I updated this sooner than I expected.

Anyways, with all this quarantining and lockdowns, somehow you will expect that I would have infinite of time to write…but welp, I live with children and it actually means I have less time since they're not in the kindergarten. So pretty much my writing pace is either the same or less.

I apologize. If this was not the situation, then you could easily expect an update weekly. Ah, how I wish! But patience as always! Enjoy!

Many weeks passed, with each passing day a new stroke of grey. A storm seemed ready to brew, stationed in the Hearts capital, only adding to an ever-present gloom that was evident through all these vacant streets. Louis had counted twenty-six people exact from what she could see in the heights of this balcony that morning. Surely they had gone picking for groceries or heading to scheduled appointments, trying hard to live their normal day to day lives in the wake of this new war. So many had gone to fight…and only a few days before had a messenger arrived, worn and desperate, dirty and ruined, calling for more soldiers to come, in his hurry not saying more, Louis only able to notice how he wouldn't stop shaking, how he was terrified to speak other words than the ones he was meant to say. No one else came after him, no letter showed, no difference was made. The alignment had long passed, whatever power, was granted. If they had been successful…everyone…everyone would have been here by now. Flowers, sparks and celebrations would have decorated the streets…the sky would be blue and Ludwig and Feliciano would give each other the tightest embrace they had ever shared. Yet the past Queen was here, gazing to the entrance gates, lost well between the mountains, expecting that fanfare…but only the occasional carriage came, as melancholy as the city. She sighed, turning back to the halls of the castle…darker than she had ever remembered them, colder, no rushing of life and no sound. She hurriedly paced wanting to find some sort of presence, and gratefully it came with a loud laugh, a clap of hands…and even little stomps.

"I still can't believe it," one maid graciously laughed, bringing light once again.

"Oh, Antonio and Lovino would be so happy to see this," another said.

Louis followed that heat of life and met a wonderful corner.

Augustino had turned one recently, a very lonely birthday made for him, only Aldrich, Louis and a handful of servants in charge of his care. Not even Feliciano had asked for his presence…he had been silent for days. A maid had mentioned that the shield was gone, but

even as so, Feliciano remained in bed, not a turn, not a breath… many servants wondered if he was even alive. Many times they came to find the plates of food as full as they had brought them, items untouched and not a word uttered, no call, not even a reaction for his nephew's birthday. He missed his first steps, testing yet brave on these castle hall floors, wondered by the glows of the few lights on, suddenly rushed at the entrance of the old Queen. Louis couldn't help taking him in her arms, raising him and giving the brightest smile she could give him. It was unfair to leave him in the glooms of these dark days, they had to show him that there were still things to smile about. She didn't want to think about why the shield was down, why Feliciano couldn't stand up, how her city seemed empty, how she heard nothing of how her loved ones were doing and what it could mean for them later. The servants there were just as unsettled and so she gave them reassurance with whatever timid smile she could give them, enough for them to breathe again, to instead focus on this bountiful child that kept laughing, reaching and playing no matter.

Echoed steps interrupted, one of the front guards tripping at his reach to them, breathless and stalling his words.

"Quick, what is the matter?" Louis demanded still with her own command, coming forward to help the man to even stand properly.

"They're coming, many, a great amount of many!"

"Who's coming?"

"Some Heartians that were fighting with Khaos, I couldn't see who exactly, but they're bringing with them thousands of Clubians. They told me they are refugees seeking to stay in the city."

"Refugees?" One maid perked.

"Thousands?"

"What on Earth has happened?"

"I only saw and I am relying a message. I do not understand what's going on either."

Louis didn't wait, she hurried off, to the very front of the castle to welcome the crowds that were coming, slow and easy, not at all the energy she herself had, begging for any to be there already. For Augustino's sake, she hoped for either Antonio or Lovino, but she also wanted her daughter, or her husband, Gilbert or…Ludwig…she desperately wished Ludwig would be the first to enter those gates.

They came like a mist, undistinguished, it wasn't until they were walking down the main castle road, now greyed, empty, without its usual gold and life, Louis noticed the colors. Spadian blue, Diamond yellow, Heartian red and many, many, many Clubian green. The first, the current lead to the castle, was Antonio, a flag in his hands as a lead to all who came behind him. He limped, his clothing was poor, he had bandages on his face and surely more under the layers, for he came with constant cringes upon his face. No matter, Augustino was unbeknown to all, he smiled, a shout to showcase it, hands open and dancing at his father's

welcome. It brought Antonio a much-needed grin, forcing a quicker pace if even the pain. He let the flag fall without a care at now the frontal castle courtyard, instead wanting to hold his son, completely enveloping him in his chest, nuzzling, kissing, taking in the scents he missed from him and his laughter.

“I have missed you so much,” he told him, with every word a stronger grip.

Renata then came, with her own flag leading the people that began to come in and continue to the entrance. Kandake then flew by at Pookie’s back, specifying where in the castle they could go. Emil walked by and Renata passed over her flag to him, so she could better focus on offering a hand and kiss to her grandson. Louis joined the hurdled, clearly shocked and questioning, only utters, trying to ask some sort of question they could give her.

It seemed like whatever they would say, it would crumble them. Her breaths were already creating cracks ready to burst.

“Whe-where-where…where’s everybody else?” They were too many to worry about.

Where were her three kids? Where were her five grandkids? Where was anybody from her family? All through the crowds she could see but battered soldiers, some even being carried in beds, some covered completely as a form of respect. There were Clubians, citizens like any other as defeated, carrying carriages of items, some with crying children and elders who coughed on.

“Roderich, Elizabeta and Lili are back in the city helping refugees locate. Alfred is still at the gates making sure everyone comes in,” Antonio at least told, turning with no other mentions, surely wanting the shade of the castle.

“But, but-but…where’s my sons, my daughter? Where’s Gilbert, and where’s Vash? Whe-where’s, where’s Ludwig?”

It was the only name that caused a startlement that stopped Renata and Antonio’s movements, shadowed more in this misery, not daring to look at the past Queen.

“Your sons and Vash are stationed in Spades ready to act. Monika and Gilbert are still at the front lines fighting.”

“Fighting? They’re still fighting?” Louis was desperate, standing in their way, not daring to let them pass until she knew everything. “I thought Ludwig was going to take care of everything, I thought he would have Khaos defeated by now, I thought-”

“Ludwig is dead!” Antonio couldn’t take more…he just wanted to rest, he just wanted to be with his son…he didn’t want her to find out this way…but he wanted his sanity…he couldn’t continue to stand being in this sorrow. “…he’s gone…” Antonio was shivering now, keeping to Augustino as some sort of fire to keep him warm. “…he left us the very day of the alignment…he tried so hard…we saw him with unbelievable power face a monster…” he trembled more at the memories, his eyes reddening and watering. “…but nothing worked… nothing is still working…” sobs…and now not even Augustino was laughing, trying to understand what his father was showing, puzzled by these tears. “Cities are crumbling…

people only continue to die…and no matter what we do…it's not enough…nothing is enough…not against those two, not-"

"…two? What do you mean two?" Louis raised her head, despite the sorrow, the tears that shed from her own eyes, she was determined to know exactly what was going on.

Antonio was not going to tell her…he moved passed her without a word…it left Renata and Kandake with the straining tale to tell.

Louis rushed the halls, leaving behind those that were meant to come with her. She took the shaft down, the circling hall, into the room, long free of magical shields. She huffed, her dress was in taters, her face marred in tears, breakage ready to combust. "Feliciano, Ludwig is-"

"Dead…yes, I know…" Feliciano uttered in a quiet murmur, in his heap, yet refusing to face.

"You knew…you knew…" she was too breathless to show if she was angered or saddened.

"From the very moment…" Feliciano opened and closed his hands, perhaps their first movements in days, as if trying to come back to the room from whatever memories he placed himself in. "I felt it…I felt him leave as if he was dying right before me…as if I shared in his final pains…and it is awful…it's awful to feel like this…he was ripped apart from my very being…and now all I feel is empty…I don't feel him…I can't really feel anything…I just… Aces, I can't deal with this, I feel like nothing." He released sobs yet again, the same of these weeks, daily, rocking his body in a compulsion. Louis ran forward, worried he was losing his breathing, far worse than whatever current fatigue she held.

"He was everything…and he has been taken away… and I can't-I can't…I can't even stand… I don't want to face the world any longer without him." Louis knew that there were no words, no comforting touch that could ail this crack fit to break the earth. How could she even comfort if she felt the same? She lost a dear grandson, cruelly and leaving behind so much disarray that was tearing apart their world. For once, she said nothing, she only stood and shared with him tears and shedding. They didn't care for the new steps, for the new joins, to Feliciano nothing meant, he said what this inner void wanted, spreading to his speak and energy.

"I want to die! I want to die if it means I can join him wherever he is. I can't deal with this…I can't with this pain!"

The words shocked all the new who came, whatever news, plans or perseverance, washed away in the flood of tears that hanged. They knew then that now was not the time for their begs and insistence. There could only be but mourning, a powerful one, unbreakable. And so the group was defeated once again, bowing to this sorrow and letting it reign.

Still, they could not leave him.

The group took to refuge in the furthest they could get in this circular room. They prepared their own mats for rest if they felt like it, servants brought them all the meals of the day, they light up their area, dim to Feliciano and they circled themselves in their own conversations.

“What cities have fallen?” Alfred asked, keeping a map with notes.

“All of Yakutia is practically gone,” Lili announced, grave that she had to say it.

“Khaos has made do with Noril’sk and Igarka.”

“The other one has taken Ust’-Nera and Yagodnoye. Lukas and his men have offered to stay at Magadar and Sokol in order to keep that area. If the second one goes any further from there, it will start to enter Hungary,” Elizabeta trembled, her words yet managing a survive to tell.

“They’ve only remained in the Club Kingdom?” Louis asked to be sure, the only one wrapped in a blanket, trying to hold down these continuous shivers, hoping desperately it was from the cold of being this bottom in the castle.

“For now, yes,” Roderich answered.

“How much longer?” She asked with such brokenness, ready to face a sure death only fated to come to them.

They all hesitated. Some were confident in their armies, others thought the future bleak, and then they turned to Feliciano…still cradled, sleeping, no expectance.

“Weeks, months?” Emil estimated.

“We can’t really be sure.” Kandake kept statured gazes on Feliciano.

“No matter, we must prepare Berlin for if either approach,” Renata had to insist, already concocting, ready to take from the papers and pens placed on the table.

So much to do, so much catastrophe to expect, to continue to fight, to make last a barrier that they didn’t know could work fully.

“How long are we permitted to stay?” Antonio asked with not a bit of his usual life, the only thing moving being the cradle he kept on Augustino’s back, sound asleep.

“A messenger will come to tell us,” Alfred still kept his attention on the map, trying to figure something out.

“And what do we do until then?” Emil asked, slightly frustrated and how he wasn’t doing his own aid, mostly not permitted because of his young age.

“I believe calm and relax…this might be one of the only chances we get,” Elizabeta dreaded to think.

“How can we do so with our people dying out there?” Antonio was indignant.

“We still need it…we need to recuperate energy, think of new strategies and magic,” Roderich stood and began a pace.

“…and talk to Feliciano,” Renata reminded, nothing of her usual charm on her.

Chatter was dropped, the reminder a menace, a bomb ticking, sitting right behind them, comfortable at rest despite surely all the hidden turmoil.

“…he is not well…and he won’t be for a while,” Lili wanted to make them realize, worried for the Queen’s wellbeing as the rest. “We can’t keep him in mind for whatever plans we have next.”

“He’s exactly what we need to kill these things,” Emil pointed, trying to contain the anger, not wanting to awaken him.

“He won’t this way,” Lili continued the discussion.

“So we are to leave our world slowly get destroyed while he just lays in bed and does nothing.”

“Emil, even if he were to awaken and decide to go fight, it won’t be enough,” Antonio came in.

“He lost the alignment,” Lili managed her speech still.

“Not just the power he was supposed to be granted, but he lost Ludwig, his husband and king. They were united in a tight bond with magic and spirit that is far from what you can understand,” Elizabeta spoke, from knowledge as Queen herself. She spared a glance to Roderich, dreading if something was to happen to either…and they had to suffer that abyss as well. “His current mental state is a sickness that is debilitating everything in his body, including his magic, no matter how powerful.”

They all gazed together to the sleeping figure, only moving in breaths.

“…it could be deadly to himself if we are not to watch,” Roderich reminded, trembling, fearful for Feliciano.

Those words made all kept a heavier eye on the sleeping Queen, afraid that any miss would get him to slip away from their grasp.

“As Lili said…we cannot depend on him for whatever happens next,” Elizabeta had to decree no matter how harsh.

“But the prophecy,” Renata tried to defend, begging.

“It’s useless,” Alfred joined.

“We do everything ourselves then…” Emil dreaded.

Silence settled, hoping for a new idea, hoping for a new chance to alight to them, but the room continued to be dark, continued to haunt. As a distraction…anything but to not look at her son's sure crippling, even if he was asleep, Renata gazed about all the items in the room. The old candelabras, the weathered curtains, broken pillars, dented walls, the old paintings of past Queens who had birthed in this room. Her gaze settled the longest on one that was claimed to be Augusta with her own two sons, her own great grandparents. She looked so different here from what Feliciano had described when he saw her mural, nothing like a Valenti, nothing like family. She had to remind herself that this was but one of many depictions...long after the last war.

"Augusta…when she lost Romulus was in the same misery…" Elizabeta told once again, seeing where Renata's eyes lay.

Alfred scoffed, "and it took her decades to get over it, all the while the war worsening around them."

They shivered if that were to be the repeat.

"…but she did eventually go to fight," Roderich reminded, "she did eventually defeat Khaos."

"I prefer we didn't have to wait decades though," Antonio said.

"What was it that even pushed Augusta to fight in the end?" Alfred asked.

"One of her sons decided to go and join the war himself. She wouldn't stand losing another loved one," Elizabeta said.

The jewels of bearing were clearly visible from their sitting, a few vines growing more into his arms, but not a covering yet, the frontal jewel that was supposed to be on his forehead not present.

They all sighed, it was fruitless.

The days went on as this, the same pace, frustrations, topics, planning…and they could only come out with more defensive strategies and attacks that would be small and useless, they knew. Reports came in of the battle… Russia was crumbling, a specific message from Tulio mentioned that they had to send dispatches to the Amazonian region of Clubs as Khaos was making fast approach. They panicked to know that if the Amazon fell…it meant it could start going into the Spades Kingdom. They did not want to look at the death numbers, they trembled and cried at the insistence for new supplies, new weapons, new ideas. Abasi called for more Whiteans to come from hiding and join the battle, Tino wrote on the dwindling amount of flight boats they had, how he was losing men and plans to return to Hearts Kingdom to defend it…in the very likely case that Khaos or the other reached. Lovino was the only one who wrote still at the very front, his letters hurried and almost unintelligible at the sure speed or shake he kept. He begged for Feliciano. there was blood and tears on this

parchment. He wrote on how they were sending back Vincenzo, as he had suffered an awful incineration that needed instant attention and away from the burnings of war.

‘He has marks that disfigure him all throughout, and I know no magic will never heal it’

These words broke Renata, she succumbed to screams and kneeling, hitting the ground, cursing loud and deep for surely the whole castle to hear. She called for vengeance, that no matter her stature, they will find a way to make Khaos and the other pay.

Destro, some wrote they were beginning to call him, and to have a name they took it, a mention in those rooms that brought darkness, desperation and acceptive defeat.

Those in the Heartian castle went to-and-fro trying to find all kinds of answers for all these messages, yet no clear answer ever came, it was only a continuous block that kept them stuck in this repetition of actions that were already useless. Another message came calling most of them back to battle, others to come in their place. Only Kandake, Renata, Elizabeta and Lili were told to stay. They heavily disagreed, but they thought it best for Feliciano to be surrounded by people close to him, perhaps other Queens, to fight this very curse he found himself in. They held still to that piece of hope, one they thought could burn more brightly if they kindled it.

That morning, while the others packed and did what they could to prepare, Kandake stayed with Feliciano, the both of them alone, of the rare moments Feliciano had gotten to be in silence. No other voices, no steps, no new stresses and turmoil of the world above. He could be numb, he could think of nothing and feel blank…only but the strokes Kandake gave on his arm, calming, soothing…but checking. She traced the new vines that grew, now some edge with a pure gold, never seen to her as bearing marks. She stayed longer on them admiring their beautiful shine. The jewels on his hands were perfectly formed, more protruding this time, but there was nothing else, a slow process, enough to say that perhaps these twins could be born much later than the expected. She suddenly moved his bangs to stare into his forehead. No jewel yet, only some hazed red vines at the very edges of the crown of his hair.

“Your children are fine,” she told him, now beginning a caress between his soft curls. “It’s slow compared to most. You’ll probably be bearing for twelve months, but it’s nothing to worry about. Still can’t get a gender if you’re curious.”

Feliciano responded in the nothing she had been used to the last days, only a late nod, slow, quickly back to the stillness of a painting.

“You probably already heard, but, Antonio, Emil, Roderich and Alfred are heading back to battle…Aldrich is thinking of joining…Louis might follow right behind him.”

Feliciano only showed a grip and a loosening of his hands. Kandake continued…trying… something…

“They might go and join Gilbert and Monika. I know Antonio will replace Lovino at the front in the Amazon, Roderich will go with him. Emil will join my people…he figured if we combined our flight tactics, things could become sufficient. Alfred will go back to his own kingdom and prepare a defense…as well as for plans if they must evacuate…”

Feliciano blinked, each flicker more saddened.

"…Arthur will come here to Berlin…your brother, Kiku and Herakles too." Kandake let the silence elongate, knowing no other words would bring a spell of life to him.

"Why?" He suddenly pierced, his first word in days.

"To be with you…"

"…it won't do anyone good…"

"They are still coming…"

Silence continued once again, Feliciano slowly accepting and responding more to her caresses, settling in her hands, a color slowly enveloping him.

"…I know they're coming to try and get me out of this…"

"Feliciano, we understand that what you're going through is hard, unimaginable and we have no right to demand anything from you right now. The rest of us are in our own mourning, weakened ourselves, but we want to believe in being together, in being there for one another."

He eased, there was a far echo of excitement, not strong enough to shine in its place on Feliciano, but Kandake felt like she could see it on a distance.

"…we should all be out there…including myself."

"Then why not? Why not go out there?" Kandake was threading thin ice, but she was determined to test it.

"…my power is not what it could be anymore…and I still feel so…empty and weak…it hurts to even breathe right now…" Internally he tried that constant reach again, nothing yet, Ludwig was gone, as he had been accustomed to discovering each time. "Even with all of you in the castle…even with all of you right here in this very room, I still feel so alone, so distant, unreachable to any of you…even right now you seem so far away…"

Kandake halted, like coming to a realization that she had been caressing a ghost, transparent and disappearing. Yet, as she reached again, her fingers for sure met those curls, they scratched on his skull, she noticed every blink, every breath, every rise…he was there.

"But I am here…I can assure you that, and I will be for as long as I can remain by your side…we all are." She gazed up, as if with it she could call them all here to prove it. "Feliciano…we would never dare leave you alone, especially now. I would like for you to at least fight with that part of you that dare suggests such a thing. If you can't see it, if you can't feel it, we will do what we can to show it. That's what were here for, to assure you of our loyalties, hopes and chances." She almost wept at that desperation in the fragility of all. "Feliciano, we still wat to believe in the future, we want to believe in you, and no matter what it takes or how long, we will be here to help when it's time to stand."

There were constant grips in his hands, reaching the ever closer to her, to truly feeling her there.

“We have all grown vengeful…I also wish to be out there and do what I can in the honor of Pisa…and so many now want to on Ludwig’s name.”

More breaths, more color came to him.

“I want to be out there to regain the Kingdoms once again, to stop this time from an entire kingdom falling as mine had done…but my loyalty to you, my dreams of seeing a Valenti finish the menace as another had done, weights before all else. I want my own vengeance fulfill in your glory as it was promised…and I’m sure I’m not the only one.”

The duty, the expectation… the fears of it all that had haunted, that had plagued…

In the last instants before the battles started, he grew that courage to be in his place, to face and fight. He was giddy, confident, there was a time he was already celebrating…but now it was like meeting the challenge all over again, trembling and falling at its door. Once again, he doubted, he denied…he was never to be what any of the kingdoms ever expected from him.

There was a time he would do it all for Ludwig, and only for him, but as his eyes caught the glimmer of red from his hand...

“You have your children now,” Kandake reminded. “You still have the chance to give them a life without war. I know it’s what you want now above all…and it’s what Ludwig would have wanted as well.”

And for once…it was almost like he could see him clearly, leaning beside him on the bed, joining Kandake’s caresses, smiling and telling him to be brave, that they could do this. Feliciano’s lips trembled in a slight grin, reaching and hoping he could touch him…but after all, it was just a memory, an image from his mind that could never come alive.

“There has to be an answer…there has to be something…and I’m sure we can find it together. Despite everything, you are still the prophesied one that has to end it all.”

Feliciano reverted back to his silence, like Kandake had not uttered such words…back to the beginning.

“Miss…” a young servant came, bowing before both. Kandake answered with her own, but Feliciano continued ignoring any new presence. “They are about to leave and would like your presence for their farewell.”

She nodded, “right away.”

He hurriedly left, while Kandake sighed and prepared words to tell them.

“I’ll be back,” she stood and although Feliciano shivered at her miss, he did nothing else, only Pookie, who had been nuzzling on his back, raised and gave a curious flight as to where

she was going. He still returned, he still knew he had to stay with his master at this time. He cuddled back to the usual it had become.

Prophecies, prophecies, prophecies…if they could have written everything…every step, every direction the outcomes will pave. A clear way that any chosen could follow, and everything could be fulfilled as it was wished by the heavens. Feliciano didn't have this booklet, this book, this divine mapping in the sky…only but a little St. Mark currently cuddling into his back and whatever will he held. He sighed, wishing to know what to do, how to start…how to even stand from this bed. And when he did…what then? What strategy? What plan? What magic? They had used every new thing they learned from the books they brought, their most powerful weapons, spells…the other that could have done something to stop this…was killed.

The harsh reminder that always had Feliciano turning back to the pillow or the blankets to shed his tears, grip and shake in the thunder of this pain again. But the thunder this time, refused to engulf the jewels, for they called louder, they made a proclamation that alighted Feliciano in a new sense.

His children…the little ones…they would be all, they would be this world, this kingdom, Feliciano… and Ludwig.…Ludwig…he suddenly sat…as if he alighted that moment for him to run and embrace.

The room was as empty as always, Pookie startled and looking about, wondering what could have caused Feliciano's first raise in weeks.

No…he was not there…but as he soothed his fingers on the jewels…he could finally feel… almost even see, these specks of magic…of life, of creation. Some were of his…with the potent of gods and a power that was Queen in the universe, and then the others…Ludwig. A line showed powerful even if not at the wealth of gods. It was of Kings, of ruling and leadership to bring forward all the kingdoms in one. Ludwig was there…Ludwig was involved in that growing magic that would one day bring their children. He will live through them, he would be alive in their magic, forever then in a new line that would be their own together.

"Ludwig…" he whispered, as if meeting him again that instant.

"Your children will be their own life, their own paths and power…" something rung, deep within him, yet releasing and surrounding him. "…but Ludwig is there…" She seemed to whisper. "He will always be with you…as will I." Feliciano hummed in delight at his great grandmother's embrace and kiss. "They will all be here…you are here. You have the ability to stand and act." With whatever magic or even wind, she caressed his face. "Do not as I did, where I waited decades before I knew I could defeat Khaos. It is still the beginning, you still have a great chance to save many and be the hero I knew my lineage would bring. Avenge your beloved. For him, your family and your kingdom, bring glory…" her breaths were slowly dispersing, she was disintegrating, leaving away to his inner depths, but he reached out, refusing her farewell yet.

"But how…how can I do this now?" He begged, yet so fragile and small.

Augusta smiled, knowing that beneath it, there was a winged lion with a menacing roar. His very own, Pookie, seemed to stare right at her, curious, wondering, reaching ever closer to see if he could earn friendship from this vision.

“I believe Pookie can help you.” Like a playful child, she chuckled, gone in that last grin.

Silence reigned in the room again…nothing at all coming back as Feliciano desperately hoped, looking at every corner as if she could materialize through these places again.

No…he was alone…with Pookie…who according to her word…could help.

He stared with great suspicion at him, as if expecting him to speak and defend himself from his crime.

“Have we…shared absolutely everything to one another?” He asked the little creature, with big question and innocence in his big eyes.

Feliciano sighed, finding himself in hopelessness yet again.

Something about that exchange brought a sudden reminder to the lion, a jump, a spin, a casting of magic that alighted his frontal jewel. Feliciano had payed no mind to it…until a sudden weight befell on his lap. He was surprised to see a book, adorned in the shine and silvers that were known from those of Khaos’s library.

“Wha-what…what?” He kept repeating, taking it and rounding it in his hands, exploring every new crevice, every new corner, mend and art…new…and not of the first pile that they had introduced to the castle from when they had returned from the spheres of validity journey.

“Pookie, did you…have you kept this ever since we were in Khaos’s castle?” He was incredulous, lost in what reaction he should show.

There was a shake of his head, bashful and blamed, but Feliciano knew it was his admittance to what he asked.

“Did you…forget to give this to us?"

Another shake that meant that it was in fact.

Feliciano groaned, angered with strong menace, but yet…he was merciful, for he knew Pookie, despite a gift from the Aces, was still an animal, with faults as…forgetting that he had one extra book that he had kept in the storage of his magic. He would have been angrier if the book’s tittle was clearly: ‘How to defeat Khaos, a step by step guide.’, but it wasn’t the case. In fact, the book’s title was: ‘The Soul and Spirit Interludes.’ What good will a book about the afterlife and the core of their spirits have? It was the kind of book that Feliciano knew, even if they had it in the first pile, they would have ignored and considered useless, but now, he could recall Augusta’s words… and perhaps…

He stood, cringing at the sudden force he gave his legs. He had been in bed for weeks and so they cracked and threatened to tumble him to the ground again. He took his time to whale and

grimace, forcing them to take their usual rhythm of steps, practiced as he kept a desperate hold to the bed. Once he saw the door, it looked distant, making him dread that he had to push forward, had to take his usual lineage of breaths, run, command, be Queen and face the war.

He rolled his eyes, cursing whatever new desires for naps, pushing himself past the thresholds, free, controlling. His life was his again.

He smiled, grandiose and beautiful, Pookie spinning and cuddling in flight with his elation.

“Come…we have to find everybody.” And for what seemed for the first time in decades, he walked those halls once again, raising his arms and eyes to point at hope and chances.

Chapter 72

For that farewell and welcome, they chose one of the many entrance rooms at the very front of the castle. Here were all their bags, weapons, parchments and books of new plans, all hurdled waiting for their transfer. Those who had to leave, found it hard to depart from the arms of those they loved, kissing, and wishing words as if they were the last ones. It was highly likely and so they told everything they could.

Alfred and Arthur settled with one another in deep comforts, the smaller close to crying, holding himself by keeping a strong grip to his husband's cloak. Roderich and Elizabeta kept saying words of poems, tight in the gaze of their eyes, refusing to look at anything else. Renata drowned Antonio in blessings, Lovino and Augustino joining in a last family embrace.

"I would have gone with you if I could," Aldrich told them, his posture weakened, the wrinkles and white strands in his hair more noticeable than ever before. No one was going to permit him to go to war at the heights of age, now with loss, gone his beloved King grandson.

"You are needed here," Roderich told his grandfather, taking his hand in a beloved hold, Aldrich sharing in it, for once a smile, if even small, in this gloom.

"We will send what we can from battle," Antonio reminded.

"We'll be here, ready to act at the worst," Kiku bellowed, straight and ready to command that instant. Despite his scars, the tiredness that he pushed aside and the pain in his eyes at losing his King, he was a Jack at full service and well still to rule the kingdom. Herakles stood beside him proud.

"I grant you blessings, safety, protection and every strength the Aces can offer us now," Aldrich wished them all in might, ever the show of a King.

Lili sighed, whispering to Kiku, "it's hard to believe the Aces can offer us anything." How it hurt the Jack to see a girl usually so hopeful and believing, discard such wishes as if talking of fairy tales and legends…especially from a girl that was technically still a child.

"If the Heart Kingdom needs defending, we'll come back as quick as possible," Emil promised, the first to take his bags and standing near the door.

"May it never come to that need," Louis kept optimism.

After him, all began their dreaded picking, their dreaded steps with direction to head out of the castle, on to their waiting transport that would take them their separate ways to play their part in the war. Last embraces, last kisses, and waves…fearful that these were perhaps last sights. Arthur was the first to stomp inside, trembling and surely begging for loneliness, to show his emotions how he wanted by himself. This was no time for a Queen to show any kind of weakness to any kind of people. Louis did not share in that sentiment, for she wept and depended on Aldrich's hold to stand.

One by one, slow and agonizing, did they make their way into the castle, dreading another meeting to discuss the bloodied passing and more dead ends.

"-Greece will refuse to send more of their people into battle, and I agree. So many must remain to guard the protection spell were planning on doing. If either Khaos or Destro comes to Hearts, the Greecians islands will be the first place they meet. We need their force there," Kiku commanded, pointing and marking on the large map of the four kingdoms.

"Are you sure this protection spell will work? My kingdom is depending on the very same one," Lili still doubted.

"It was a spell from Augusta herself. I'm sure it will buy us time," Renata added.

"I'm confident in it and the strength my province has," Herakles was clear.

"Alfred is ready to use it in his own kingdom," Kandake informed.

"When Khaos approaches, we will truly see then if it is worth the use in Diamonds and Hearts," Aldrich said.

"Re-reports of where Khaos and Destro…cur-currently stand?" Vincenzo's voice was hoarse, the only one who kept a sitting, more heavily bandaged than any of the newcomers. Every move he made looked strained, every breath shook him with pain. Renata feared the scars she would meet under those bandages, not from their looks, but showcasing the horror her husband went through. So many thought he shouldn't be there to gather more burden, but he insisted, wanting to keep his part somehow.

"Destro is currently ravaging Hungary," Renata answered, biting her lips, not wanting to tear more than she had already done.

"While Khaos makes fast approach to the Amazon. The Spadian border is preparing for the oncoming battle," Louis informed from letters she just finished reading.

"More of my people are coming from hiding to help them. Others were evacuated to Hearts and Spades. Our people can no longer call Clubs home," Kandake told with hurt.

"Who is fighting Khaos and who Destro?" Aldrich demanded.

"The Royal Heartian Battalion are currently trying to whether down Khaos. They also have the aid of the Arabian Soldiers of Diamonds and another special Clubian Fighter Squadron where Ivan is in," Arthur informed, placing their symbols on the map with his fast wielding magic.

"Another part of our army faces Destro, along with the people of the White Kingdom and the Spadian High Protection Squadron," Kiku continued.

"What have they been using to fight? These monsters are still standing and destroying. We must plan new tactics immediately," Aldrich imposed.

“We’re going through every single book that Ludwig and Feliciano got from Khaos’s library,” Lili exasperated, not liking the dictate her grandfather asked it in.

“I believe we have to start looking at something else other than these books,” Louis felt like she was getting betrayed by them.

“What other thing can we possibly read into to get ideas now?” Elizabeta glared.

“Maybe this,” there was the add of a new book, dropped unto the table, seeming to glow alone on top of all the items that were there. The voice was not one that had been there with them…one that they thought they wouldn’t hear again as lively. When they raised their eyes, they didn’t think he would be standing as he did before them, dressed, cleaned, Pookie well placed on his shoulder, licking his paws as if nothing. He shone ready for what was to come as the days before the alignment.

“Feliciano…?” Herakles was the first to say a word, like the rest, startled into a stupor.

Renata couldn’t hold it, rushing and tumbling, the first to give him an embrace, probably his first in a long while. To the surprise of all…Feliciano smiled, his arms around her, cradling into her neck and accepting a settling.

“You’re actually here?” Arthur was finding it hard to believe.

“I…I think so…aren’t I…aren’t I here?” His tone was sure, with chuckles and brightness that brought ease once again after so long.

Kiku was the next, laughing and instigating his own embrace, joyous and as the times from before. It was like they were seeing other again after years. “You are…and it has brought me more happiness than you can imagine.” To whimpers they surely would have gone, but with a silent understanding, they knew that they had done well enough of that. As the Queen and Jack, once united to their King so strongly, Kiku felt the loss almost as profound as Feliciano, and so they understood the pain the most, the perfect console in their grasps and cradle.

“Are you sure you are well?” It made Kandake as ecstatic as the rest, but she wanted to know if his health was the right one to be able to stand so righteously as he did.

Feliciano touched himself as if trying to find some new bruise. Upon not finding it, he gazed back sure, Kandake confident in that air of perseverance.

“I’m…still…really sad, and I still…feel pain and it hurts me…in a way I assume none of you will know…I miss Ludwig, I miss him dearly and… I would still pay anything so he wouldn’t have given his life as he did.” There was deep mourning in his eyes, there even when he had entered the room. They were too surprised in his sudden presence to have noticed it. “But despite that…I can stand…I can move, I can act… I’m still…able to do something…” he breathed, as if once again coming to the realization that he could do all these very things. “My world is at stake…everything we know could die and I…” he gripped his hands, feeling well the jewels. “Cannot let that happen…I cannot let all those I care for and love die. I have a responsibility for my children… I have a duty as Queen… and as Augusta’s chosen…” He came close to the table, his hand reaching to read a letter from

Diamonds, one of a small village heavily fearful, their concerns drowning, some accepting the outcome of death and thinking themselves forgotten by their kingdom. “I will take part. I will do what’s necessary and fight if I have to,” he declared, a proclamation well stated, and all knew they could not back him out of, no matter what concerns they still held.

“Glad you can join us, your majesty,” Louis bowed, with a deep smile that Feliciano gave her back, despite her excessive greeting.

Vincenzo wished he had the strength to stand and hug his son, but he settled with a smile and a grip on the table, “well, let’s get straight to work then. What have you brought us?” He pointed to the book, bringing all their attention back on it.

“The Soul and Spirit Interludes,” Elizabeta offered to read aloud, being close, her own welcome to Feliciano but a grasp of her hand to his to show her support.

“This is only about the afterlife,” Aldrich said.

“How can we use it?” Lili agreed with her grandfather’s skepticism.

“To be honest…I don’t know. I was only given a sign by Augusta herself…I haven’t sat down to read and figure it out,” Feliciano admitted shyly.

“If Augusta told you, something indeed must be kept in it,” Kiku took it and offered his start of a read, with an introduction, explanations, and simple spells that all in this table surely knew.

“Why are we checking for new ways and reading into books about the dead? Feliciano is awake, he has power of the alignment to go and face Khaos and Destro. We should settle off this instant,” Herakles put in, thinking it the clearest answer.

“Feliciano was underground, protected by a Validity Sphere field…nothing from that power came to him. He well missed it,” Lili informed.

“Are you sure, Feliciano?” Kandake wanted to make clear. Perhaps he still grasped something and maybe they couldn’t see it…maybe Feliciano could feel it…but he moved his head in a negative, assuring that no new magic had surged within him.

“This is the power we hoped for to save us all. What else can we depend on now?” Aldrich insisted.

“Whatever that book has,” Lovino pointed, obvious, easy and every answer at their disposal. He spared a smile at his brother, both not being able to embrace each other because of their distance.

“I would prefer something immediate,” Aldrich, even as he gazed forward, with the ever stature of a king, there was trembling in his tone, a shining worry, all understanding that his insistence was on fearing for his people.

“I’m afraid…” Kandake gazed over to Kiku, taking in every new word in the book, but not enlightened enough as if to shout a new idea, “…we must wait still.”

“And what do you suppose we do in the meantime?” Arthur glared, indeed not liking how no sort of action was to take even with Feliciano awakened.

“We read, we write, we talk, about whatever that book has. We’ll go through every detail, every idea…” Lovino explained.

“Something…something must be in here,” Kiku said.

“And the war?” Arthur wanted to return them to those currently in battle.

“We keep fighting back with whatever we can,” Feliciano leaned close, now a sure add.

“We’ve used everything. Nothing has been successful,” Aldrich exasperated.

“No, we haven’t,” Feliciano fought back, in a defend that all were impressed by. “There is so much we believe to be useless that can be just what we need. Herakles! Are you willing to lead at our borders?” It was sudden, the imposed responsibility that shook him that moment…but quick, he stood, forward, nodded sure, ready. “By my command…the moment Destro touches Austria in Clubs…I want you to head off to the Grecians islands and help everyone not just for a protection spell, but for a Tuemia spell as well.”

“Tuemia?” Arthur grimaced, almost disgusted.

“Isn’t that spell just used…for fireworks?” Louis found herself confused.

“When heightened and the force intensified, the cracks can be as deadly as our most powerful fire spell.”

“I know the tactic. Herakles, I can teach you it myself,” Kandake offered.

Although hesitant, his trust in them was more than his questions, so he nodded, ready to practice.

“I want messages sent instantly to the fronts telling them to try this spell as well. I must know if there is any other reaction that can help us.” Some set off to work on the writing. “Diamonds is at risk at being attack by the Georgiatian sea. Lili, I need you to send immediate messages to guard the entire line that faces it. If they must come from battle, so be it.” She nodded and went to writing herself. “Arthur, of the Sloan cannons, begin to spread of the lesser ones around your kingdom. Where is the big Sloan currently?”

“It’s being used against Khaos on the front in Russia.”

“Keep it always by them then. After every Tuemia, fire a shot. Send whatever aid to keep the protection spells on the soldiers strong.” And like that commands continued, a movement in the room constant in action and working towards any kind of advance.

Days went on of the same actions, now spread across the castle as they kept researching information in any of the libraries and studies, taking it with them even as they rested, as they

chatted, as they cared for little Augustino. The Queens and the Heartian Jack took it to only study ‘The Soul and Spirit Interludes’, always huddled in a tightness that almost looked private and secretive, their chats so low as they used whatever energy to try and concentrate on the fullest.

Feliciano’s suggestions on battle have proven to be successful enough. Khaos and Destro were still menaces rampaging and killing, but the Tuemia had managed force enough to even move them away from paths largely populated, given enough time to get the people evacuated. It was not the defeat they wanted, but as Feliciano had intended, it gave them time to huddle and give all the depth to the reading of this book.

Arthur groaned, now angrily tapping his fingers to the table they used, “we know all this.”

“Patience, we must keep reading, I’m sure the answer is right before us,” Kiku told as he continued his reading, only stopping to add notes in the many parchments they had.

“The deceased enters. The first realm is a mirror lake. All resided magic must be released. This takes a period of four days by our time. Second realm is the Inhabitance. A stronger aware comes, with speech and understanding to the movement of your new spirit body. From the magic of mourning in the living, it estimates how long you remain. Some stay only a mere amount of days, others months. The third realm, although it is not a new location, it is a period of transformation into your soul, an outlook that can take the form the Aces decide. The last and fourth realm is the sea passage, a route to the heavens. Angels come and guide you to the other world of our Aces, to serve them until they send you to a new life,” Elizabeta repeated the known process of afterlife from the notes they had taken. The book did go well into detail on each realm’s structure and workings, fascination to some, to others, those who were utter experts, found it a bore and found themselves less patient.

“We still haven’t finished it. I’m sure there has to be something in the last two chapters,” Lili reminded.

“There has been cases of people coming back from the dead while being in the fourth realm,” Kiku said as he read one of the last paragraphs in the current chapter. It was one of the details that perked their interest, but they knew it would be useless in the war, so they continued in their indifference.

They stood staring at a beautifully decorated seal, they guessed a representation of the door of entrance into the fourth realm. Wondered they were at the shine, that the tittle of the next chapter came like a sudden breaking.

“Self-passage through the Soul and Spirit Interludes,” Feliciano read aloud.

Arthur sat up, leaning with the rest, “Self-passage? …It almost sounds like a map to go.”

“…and come back,” Elizabeta caught the words, pointing them, right in the very first page of the chapter.

They all froze at the realization of what it could mean.

“Is that…what Augusta is trying to tell us?” Feliciano questioned.

“You are Augusta’s chosen, she lives within you, you should know more than we do,” Lili said.

“She never told me anything on how I can use the Soul and Spirit Interludes.”

“I don’t understand what could be in there that we can use,” Kiku said.

“We are not finished yet,” Arthur interrupted, attentive now more than ever, begging in his closeness to continue.

Indeed there were still two chapters left, and so this time they tried to hurry, difficult as this chapter gave grave details on a journey that done the wrong way could mean immediate death or even getting lost between, with no onward to the heavens or a return to their world. They wrote as serious as if they were to take that trip themselves, trembling and hesitant, hoping each new page brought something that didn’t mean submitting themselves to this.

That last chapter gave the reasoning, the purpose.

“The Eternal Reserve,” Lili read breathless.

Already it promised greatness, all staring between themselves, ready for what could be the answer they were looking for.

“As all humans and creatures go through this process, power and magic is also part of the transition,” Feliciano joined in reading aloud, the rest of the passage only mentioning a known process of when magic and power dies.

“Some join the Aces in their heaven, some disappear from existence, and some, if even a short time, can remain in the Eternal Reserve, found between the first and the fourth realm in a unique connection,” Arthur shook along with the rest, anticipating.

It began to list all kinds of powers that had been stored there, great ones that had them gasping and creaking. “-the Fickicious Blow and the power of the universal alignment,” Kiku read and almost fell from his chair.

“There’s our answer right there!” Lili pointed, standing, her chair screeching in her loud proclaim.

“Hold it! We haven’t finished reading,” Elizabeta raised a finger, commanding silence, this time putting Arthur to read since Kiku looked too taken to his thoughts to do so.

“-all of these have been proven to be transportable. Once in the human world they regain their power in their original form.” Even so, they excited, for once a light in this long tunnel of despair appeared and they were ready to submerge no matter. “-there are even ways to heighten the power, but only the Aces, or someone of their power, can achieve that.” They all looked to Feliciano, longing and waiting for a reply from him…but he remained silent, yet with widened eyes and a shake now with worry. They returned their gaze back to Arthur for

the next part of the reading, but no more came. The Spadian Queen stared extensively at the design of a jewel at the very end…hoping for any new words.

“Is that it?” Lili tried to wake.

“Indeed. There is really…nothing else.” To demonstrate, he shut the book, the first time done since Feliciano had presented it.

Stillness as each was devoted to their own thoughts, their own conclusions and plans, breathing in and out as the only chorus of the room.

Their next step was present, it was surely decided the moment the necessary lines were read. Now they were missing a declare, for someone to stand up and word out exactly the new comings. Lili was the first to not take this silence any longer, not while there was a war, with her brother still fighting. She stood, loud despite her smallness, “It’s obvious what we have to do. Someone has to go to the Interludes.”

“A process which involves actually killing one of us in order to even start,” Elizabeta reminded.

“The book itself mentions that it has to be dealt with extreme caution and in very specific ways. We push too much or miss a step, and we have a body in which the spirit and soul cannot return to. Then indeed it is a permanent death,” Arthur added.

“Not only are we left with the weight of killing someone of royal importance, but losing the last chance we had to getting something to win this war,” Kiku said.

“We have to be extremely cautious on how we do this. We can’t go headfirst and risk ourselves without a proper understanding,” Elizabeta continued.

Lili sat back, feeling embarrassed and frustrated, a heavy sigh, gripping her hands and biting her lips, deep anguish for her family and kingdom.

“Lili, we understand what you’re feeling right now. We all want to do something immediately. But we really can’t mess this up…not when it’s the only thing we have,” Arthur told her in the small calm and composure he could utter.

Silence came once again, Lili this time accepting it…finding it fair to put her mind and find the proper way.

“What should we start with?” Kiku sat straight, ready to begin this arduous planning.

“I guess…who’s going to go…” Lili said.

They all inhaled as if they were all placed under a sword to partake immediately.

“…does it really have to be one of us?” Arthur groaned.

“It is us that everyone is looking upon,” Kiku had begun to bite his nails, thinking it in the worst case of both…none of them looking well no matter who did it and how.

Arthur sighed, “is there really nothing else we can do?”

“What else? Besides, if we do find something different, it’ll be the same levels of dangers as this,” Lili pouted.

“This is the only way,” Elizabeta only said what surely all knew. It was currently their only door.

“Then…we must head…and we have to start as soon as possible,” Arthur had no choice but to agree.

“Then, let us begin as gruesome as possible…how exactly are we going to fulfill this killing…our entrance to the Interludes and what do we do to get them back?” Kiku went straight to, “if one of us is going to risk themselves, then, at least we should know beforehand how exactly it’s going to work.”

“What exactly did the book recommend?” Arthur took it, looking through the pages.

“…drowning…” Feliciano uttered, low and shinning with the most dread in his expression.

“…along with a suspension freeze spell. The body must remain in the water for the entire process,” Lili added, knowing Feliciano must still be in the deep shock to give more words.

“Those who stay must remain watchful of the body and make a mourning for once they reach the second realm. The longest we can let the person stay is a month,” Kiku continued.

“I’m going to assume it’s just enough time to get this thing in the interludes,” Arthur said.

“How exactly do we even find it there?” Elizabeta got the book this time, wanting specifications.

“Found between the first and the fourth realm in a unique connection,” Kiku repeated the words, “nothing else is mentioned.”

“So, whoever goes has to find this on their own once there?” Lili trembled.

“Precisely,” Elizabeta assured, finding nothing else in the book. It made the mission harder, more prominent in its danger.

“And…let’s say that whoever goes, finds it. How will we know that? When will it be safe for us to revive the body?...How do we even do it?” Arthur asked.

“The notes here say that the person is able to bring themselves back if they find what they need,” Lili rummaged through the papers.

“The month limit is for if it takes too long and we don’t want to risk them truly dying,” Elizabeta said.

“And for that we just stop the suspension freeze and bring them out of the water,” Lili continued.

“Where are we going to keep them? How will we deal having one of us missing?” Kiku worried.

“There’s many baths in this castle. I’m sure any will be sufficient,” Lili said.

“There’s more than us working on the war this instant while we discuss. If one of us is gone, it will be a chance to save the four kingdoms. They will understand,” Elizabeta said.

“But we have to keep watch on the body,” Lili reminded.

“And we can do that while also working on the efforts of the war,” Elizabeta was sure.

“Then…once again…whose going?” Kiku brought them back to their first point.

And they were back in silence, in wondering, in biting their lips, searching for the push, that bravery that could raise their hands in the acceptance of such a faith. Minutes went on, lost in nothing, hesitant, still questioning its true eligibility, but it was the only one, it was the only answer, and it annoyed Feliciano greatly that they were debating to do the only thing left. He stood, not taking it, this his form of explosion, if even surprisingly calm for him, “when can we start?”

“Once we know who-”

“I’m going,” fierce and powerful, a demand that had all in the table meeting their gaze to him in shock and question. “So… when can we start?”

Chapter 73

“I am incredibly uncertain about this,” Arthur said, yet joining the others in their decreed way.

The castle seemed more active than it had ever been during this entire war, a rush passing by them or following behind.

“It’s only obvious I should go,” Feliciano lead this huddle of many worried, trembling or even ready to begin the process. “I was the one who missed the alignment, I’m the one whose prophesied to finish all this and I have the magic necessary that can help me more than any of you in the interludes.”

“Feliciano, you only but just recently left the birthing room. I don’t think you are yet mentally stable for this,” Kandake tried to walk at his pace, wanting that he would look at her, not just forward, to the room decided would bring their faith.

“You are bearing!” Louis joined, of the many at the front wanting to keep his speed.

“All the Queens should be here to take action,” Aldrich said.

“I am fine,” he tried to make it sound stable, yet it was forced, there was anger, clearly part of the denial. “I am sure the children will be fine.” He gave the jewels a short caress, the only moment he had gotten his eyes elsewhere. “All the Queens will take action. I am only doing my part.” He began to take off the red cape and the jacket he had been wearing, meaning to throw it to the floor carelessly, instead, his mother caught it, part of her refusal, holding and offering for if he still changed his minds in the mere minutes left.

“Amore, there are so many who could go in your name.”

“I don’t need anyone to go for me. If I can do it, I will.”

“But if we loose you, we loose the biggest piece we have in this war,” Herakles said.

Feliciano took a deep breath, swallowing once again the weight and terror of all this, “I won’t fail.”

“And if you do…what then?” Vincenzo posed the dreaded question, the one to turn Feliciano’s step into hesitance.

It was small. Another breath and he continued as he had.

“Then all hope is gone. Nothing else will be left.”

Many servants and maids stood beside the room that was decided. They trembled in their eyes, it spread to their clothes, a panic that worsened at the groups’ coming.

“But I won’t let you down. I know what this means, and I can’t let myself betray the kingdoms.” He raised his hand, with a queenly decree to open.

Elizabeta held it before it was uttered. “Once you pass those doors, we will understand then that there’s nothing we can do to change your mind. We will start and you will be brought into the Interludes. One last time…are you sure you want to do this?”

All, even the servants and maids, stared hoping still for other words that could spare him from this, that anybody else still had the chance to offer themselves. With the elongated silence, they wanted to believe it was to happen, coming ever closer for the acceptance.

Feliciano released himself from Elizabeta’s grasp and used the hand to push open the door, making his way inside. The rest looked between themselves hoping for any new words that could help to get him out of there before it truly began, but now they had nothing. It was as Elizabeta had said, by this point, there was nothing they could do to change his mind. All they could do now was to fulfill their part, heading behind him to begin.

The room they chose was the one that held the recreational pool. The specific servants who worked there could well count the times it had been used. Feliciano and Ludwig themselves had only been there two times…one of those being in their heated Roseann spring frenzy. All Feliciano could see were the spots they had made love, where they told sweet words, smiled and touched in what they had thought a forever. To Feliciano it was a new shot of pain, biting his lips, peeling himself harshly away from those scenes of memory, a new shade of tears to add to his eyes. No…he couldn’t show this now…especially now.

“This place is actually gorgeous,” Lovino had to admit.

And indeed it was a majesty.

The room was dark, in the solid of the rock that had formed it. The only light was but those of specific jewels. There were three large ones that emitted a pinkish light, at three high points, right above the formations that cascaded new water into the pool below. The rest of these jewels were in the waters, showcasing the depths…perfect enough for one to lay in its infinite…no safe reach to the surface. Some shivered at its emptiness for now.

Planted fauna, along with small statues decorated it heavenly, a beauty that made many wonder why they didn’t use it more often…and why did it have to come to them using it for a purposed drowning. Distracted they were to not notice how Feliciano already sat at an edge, rolling his pants and taking off his boots, to the side uncaring…he wouldn’t need them dead. He could have swung himself that instant, but he was held by a hand on his shoulder, looking up to meet with his cousin. Herakles turned his head, asking for patience.

“All right, so, we need someone to stay always at the door, controlling who comes in and even defending if it comes to it,” Lovino loudly told.

“I will offer myself then,” Louis said, already taking a seating, brandishing a polished and beautiful spear…out of its case for the first time in decades.

“Us Queens will take the ever watch on Feliciano, as well as necessary mourning,” Arthur said, Elizabeta and Lili joining on his side, creating a sort of shield on Feliciano, to stand strong from that moment.

“Yet, we are in need of more watchers and mourners for if we are needed elsewhere,” Elizabeta reminded.

“Then the rest of us will stay here, to act quick if that is to be the case,” Kiku said.

“Messengers are rallied, and we are prepared to work here,” Aldrich said, in his place along with the rest. He was determined to be a part of this, to be close. All the tables, plans, books, even charms and talismans were there with them, a good space apart from the pool so neither could be disturbed, each in their own mission.

As they all made their final chats and placings, Lovino headed over to his brother, kneeling beside him, worried glances exchanged…but loving, yet dreading, both beginning to take a synchronized row of breaths.

“Lovino, I’m already here. You can’t change my mind any-”

“I know…I…just want to tell you to be safe…I don’t want anything to happen to you…”

Feliciano smiled, yet a dry hand coming to take one of Lovino’s, the grasp tight and assuring.

Lovino sighed, “you know what you have to do.”

“Ever since I decided. I’ve read the chapters like twenty times. I know enough, I know what I need.” He gazed to the water, like a new door before him. “I’ll…do my best…and then I’ll be back before you guys know it,” he confided with such a large smile, the one of their youth, his and now Lovino knew ever shinning.

“Any idea on where the power will be though?”

“I’ll look, I’ll do whatever it takes, I know I’ll find it.”

“Fine and…Feli…” and there was the chest, the musical one, placed right beside him on the ground.

“I wish I could take it,” Feliciano admitted.

“I’ll play the melody…perhaps you’ll be able to hear it…perhaps it can help.” He wanted to hope…he wanted to do more.

“It might… I’ll try to hear it.”

Lovino smiled…lowering down for an embrace, Feliciano knowing his last physical warmth before he left. It was then Vicenzo and Renata who came down, sharing in it as well.

“What about…what about the children?” Vincenzo pointed to the jewels.

“I’ve said it enough times, papa. They’ll be fine.”

“The body will be well kept, and while Feliciano is surviving in the Interludes with a hold spell, the children will be able to grow as per usual from the magic here,” Renata deemed.

“I hope so…” Feliciano let his hands caress them, not knowing if they will be in the interludes as his light and belief.

“We still don’t truly know though,” Louis had to remind.

“I don’t think someone has ever purposely gone to the interludes while bearing,” Lili added.

“Well…I’ll come back and be the first one to write about it, I guess,” Feliciano breathed, his feet now entering the water, the cold giving a strong shiver that almost froze his entire body that instant.

“The time is upon us…who will create and hold the suspension spell,” Vincenzo alarmed.

“I-” Herakles was to offer, but he was interrupted by the crashing entrance of a messenger. It had been so sudden that Louis had bared her spear at him. The messenger was too frantic to care about the weapon pointed at him.

“Destro! He has entered Austria!” He shouted, just the alarm that brought them all to hesitance once again. They shared panicked glances, their worry heightened, and a new dread of planning was to come…just as Feliciano was set to leave.

Herakles looked to Feliciano, and he nodded, the Queen giving the command for what had been a planned leave.

“And where is Khaos?” Lovino asked.

“The defenses of the Amazon are crumbling…they expect soon entrance into Spades as well.” The messenger was still breathing heavily, every word more a weight on him.

Many fretted, halted in confusion on what to do.

“I’ll head to Greece immediately and begin our protection at the border,” Herakles stood proud, making his way, but not before coming to Kiku, a tight caring hold of his arms before they embraced and kissed.

“We continue as we have. We create new tactics, new attacks, send orders,” Aldrich tried to calm.

“There are casters in Italy of old age that wrote to me that they will act on such a case. I’ll message them this instant, perhaps they can join you, Herakles,” Vincenzo stood.

“There are also casters of equal state and strengths in Japan as well. I’ll tell them to join along,” Kiku said…anything to help his intended.

“See if there is anybody still in Germany that can go and fight,” Renata joined. She feared how they were in their last resort…sending seniors to war.

“Arthur, I recommend you start sending reinforcements to the Oralee. It is an easy door for Diamonds that Khaos can misuse,” Elizabeta suggested, and the Spadian Queen began his orders.

“Amore,” Renata kneeled back to her son’s sitting, who was now held, wanting to also fulfill duties in this fighting, but nothing came from his mouth, the water surrounding his feet reminded of what he was meant to do instead. “I’ll hold the suspension spell.” There were no disagreements and so it was decided. Feliciano held her hands tightly in gratitude.

Orders and plans began to get shouted, the room now a mess. Lili began organizing a map, putting accord new plans, paths, and locations. “Opa, look,” she pointed and so all noticed the route Destro was taking, new terrors reigning.

“He’s trying to get to Hearts,” Louis said aloud.

“More specifically…he wants to come to Berlin,” Lili noticed.

Some teared, some paced trying to rid of their shake.

“His plans have long been obvious. What difference does it make that it’s more sure?” Vincenzo said.

“It shows that there’s a specific purpose,” Lili glances to Feliciano and all knew for certain the main important plot for Destro.

“He’s heading right to us,” Aldrich said.

“Then we defend the castle. We make evacuation plans. We can’t let that freak get to Feliciano, especially while he’s in the Interludes,” Lovino appointed.

“Our time has been shortened though,” Aldrich reminds.

“Well, fratellino, you better hurry the fuck up then,” Lovino turned to him.

“I’ll try my best.”

“We have to start now!” Kiku deemed it.

“Hurry, we don’t have any more time to lose,” Herakles said, his last words before he was out of the room, to battle like many.

“Feliciano, it’s time for you to start getting in,” Aldrich said.

And so Feliciano nodded, taking his last deep breath before he followed the command of the last king and began a slow submersion into the water.

No one else could work, no one else could go on with their mission, Feliciano felt all their eyes on him. If it wasn't for the chill of the pool, for the coming dread of death, it would have bothered him, but it didn't matter, not now when he was especially close. He could depend on the steps, taking them one by one, submerging only slightly each time. When the water was by his torso, he extended his leg and found no more rock to hold, it was then the vastness he had to take. He turned one last time to all, now so far.

"Please…be safe," the last words he heard were those of his father, taking his wife's side as comfort for what he was seeing, pain like the ones scarred on his body.

Feliciano nodded, hoping they could see all the love in his bright open eyes, before he faced the water, breathe and he jumped forward without any more delays.

He was now completely submerged, falling and letting the water take care of his descend however it wanted. He didn't fight, he didn't reach, he was not meant to escape from this. Relax…he let it all take him in. Don't be fearful…sleep.

There was the constriction, of the water filling his lungs. It would have been painful if he had begun to fight it, but he was going in ease, continuing his fall, now reaching a mid where he could float in an infinite. Slowly did the darkness took him, easing everything until all movements ceased, and he couldn't control anymore how even his arms and legs fell. He was gone with an accepting seal of his eyes.

They all watched the rumbling, the bubbles, all to the very last one that surfaced.

"Renata, now," Kandake commanded, seeing the opportune moment.

Renata breathed in, rubbing her hands together, her breath releasing in a pinkish glow in the palm of her hands. Like a blown kiss, it floated and coated the pool, a beautiful pink mist to arise and drape before it fell and reached for the body it was to work on. It took it like a large blanket, draping him all until only a glow on his silhouette was left. Renata's palm was in the same glow.

"The hold depends on you. Make sure to always keep it," Kiku said.

"With my life if it comes to it," she held it dear to herself, as if it was her little son.

Feliciano shone like another jewel of the ones below the pool, but it was still disconcerting… how he was dead… even if he was meant to come back and was holding to some sort of life line with Renata's spell. Their entire future laid on him like this. They were fearful of all the wrong that could occur, of this castle crumbling under Destro's wrath, of Feliciano never returning from this, of a future enslaved or killed by this menace.

Arthur hated how defeated they looked…when they haven't finished anything and Feliciano was just floating uselessly in the pool. "We don't accomplish anything just standing around here. Feliciano won't be coming back anytime soon. Come, let's get to work." He turned and continued his orders to get the Oralee mobilized, as well as see if there was anymore that could be done to defend the Spadian border that was soon to be breached. And one by one they followed the Spadian Queen's suggestion, heading to their place. The only who

remained in their stare were Vincenzo, Renata, Kandake and Pookie. They didn't dare leave. They wanted to keep ever watch, as if they could help defend him even if he was in another world…as if they could still reach him.

Eternal…always in these waters, floating, vast, in a surrounding of nothing. It extended like this, his body in answer to its void. No response, no way to-…wait. It was then that Feliciano realized he was aware, that he knew his body or…soul and spirit, were present in these new waters. He could move his arms apart, paddle his legs, if even slight moves, slow. He tested his eyes, welcoming, adjusting them to what they could see and meet.

Vast darkness, more so than what he knew the pool had been. The pink jewels were gone, instead, he saw a far blue light, like a moon shinning far off, into a surface. He could see ripples, small, like small stones falling upon it. There was something out there, new and…he could turn his body, energy was coming to him again, he had impulse and he used it to swim upward, now far, a grand effort that for Feliciano was like swimming the length of a full ocean. As he did, he realized that he hadn't used his breaths…and that he didn't need them. They didn't exist here anymore. The closer he got to the top, the more there was this invisible pull, rushing him forward until finally he was released. No splash, no disturbance in this surface. He landed as if he was on solid ground, easy and balanced…even with an infinite depth of water below him. His steps caused only but a small ripple that easily disappeared, and once it was gone, Feliciano came to the realization that he was just as alone, in yet another blanket of darkness above him. No sun, no moon, no stars…no jewels even from the Aces to decorate such dread. That blue light he saw was somehow emanated from the very line that divided the water and this…place.

Could he…move, walk? He could raise his hands, legs, turn his head. He tested a foot forward. Solid, another gentile ripple. Yes, this was ground he could trust for now to venture.

As he completely settled straight, he noticed that the jewels of bearing weren't present…only a haze red that looked more like a simple bruise. Yet, they were in their form and place, still a reminder that they were there. Actually, now that he saw, he had his normal arms, legs, stomach, head. He rummaged his fingers through his hair, still with its curls, feeling the same texture and skin. Even his clothes were the very ones he had taken his dive with. The only difference was all his bruises, cuts and scars were gone, with a small red glow surrounding him, as another light to guide. The realization made him smile, even extend himself upward ready to jump and shout in celebration.

This had worked! He was in the Interludes! This was surely the first realm.

He gazed about him, still the same infinite darkness, nothing of the descriptions he had read.

Where was he to go? What direction could he take? Who could he even speak to?

He was ready to dash for whatever he could find, to turn and shout if he had to. A sudden blast of white, lightning and shock as he stumbled upon it. Feliciano startled and screamed back at the sudden appearance of a body, floating and resting right before him, all is if he was in the depths of water the person was not actually in. He was from the White Kingdom, deep

dark skin, his silvers, pearls and rich white silks from his soldier uniform, swaying along with him in quite a majesty. The body would disappear into a haze, but then he would shimmer again in this sudden crackling of light. Every time it extended below him, a single zigzagged line reaching down, disappearing into vastness. That glow made him notice another body, deep below in the waters, flying and extending with not a wetness noticeable. This one a woman from Diamonds…the Israeli province he knew, she had the symbols along with her yellows. She also wore her soldier uniform, the same flashes of sparks, only in yellow…deep in rest as the other figure.

Feliciano waved, tried to do any kind of big movement that could get them to wake up…yet they remained as they were. He dared to reach his hand to touch, but the shocks instantly got him, painful and burning. Feliciano couldn't believe he could feel such a physical attack… when he was supposed to be dead. He moved back, he felt another shock and burn, another sudden body. It pained to know it was a Heartian, red, from Greece…surely of those sent to aid the fight at the front with Destro.

As the blazing continued, extending, Feliciano could spot another Whitean, a Spadian, Clubian…several more, making the space glow in quite a beautiful array of colors. They were now everywhere…but not a single one standing as he did, pointing or providing a way. He spun, he fretted, anxious breathing that he didn't think would follow him here.

Okay, think, steady your breathing as if you were still alive…what did the book say? What did we talk about with everybody else? He brought his hands to massage his head as he ordered everything in his mind.

"The deceased enters. The first realm is a mirror lake," he remembered Elizabeta's word, clear now once he stared to the endless bottom of this water. It wasn't mirror-like…he didn't spot his own reflection…only the other bodies.

"All resided magic must be released." Those sparks…how it had no specification…it was just to…release.

That very moment, the body of a near Heartian boomed loudly, the glow coating Feliciano all in red. The body continued its rest…into haze, then more small sparks, but yet he didn't awake.

Feliciano now couldn't control his breathing as he realized that all these bodies…so many… so many… wearing soldier uniforms…were the dead of the war currently being fought. So many looked so young…so many with badges and seals that showed their hard efforts…a life dedicated…finished in this. Feliciano shivered, tears brimming, close to kneeling him in the loss and misery.

"This takes a period of four days in our time. A week in the time of the realm."

Enough, enough, enough, he repeated to himself in deep anguish, understanding that there was a mission that needed to be fulfilled…and it had a time limit. Even if he managed a passing to the Interludes with the chance of survival, for those once past lives that hauntingly floated around him…there was nothing he could do. He wallowed in the pain and blame… wondering if part could have been avoided if he would have acted earlier, if there was

something before everything that could have been key to an easy victory…not to this reach where he had to visit the afterlife.

Breathe…he had a week in this realm to find whatever answer he could. Even if nothing seemed present that instant…he had to explore, venture and hope that he could find a clue… or even someone.

He stood, just as a Spadian body flew along him, as he gazed upward and noticed a larger array than before, all from Diamonds. Feliciano swallowed, not wanting to know what it meant.

Okay, he had to go on. One foot forward, the next following, a pace as if he was strolling through the castle. He tried to keep that singular line, only his gaze turning to the bodies he saw, careful of the lights that shot down.

Into the depths he went, yet still the only red light that walked singularly in that eternal extend.

Chapter 74

It was the third day of Feliciano's journey in the interludes, well-marked before all in large writings tall above the pool. Louis had made it to keep themselves counted, to make sure and not miss a single beat of this mission. They kept their watch on the body. It was never left unseen. There was a rhythm of turns they had already begun to get used to, all while others took their own turn attending to the war. The room was never quiet, someone was always running in and out, stomping, throwing items or shouting, making it almost impossible to take any sleep as they had hoped.

"-It is imminent! We need to guard even the Northern Heartian border. The Faroe Islands I'm sure have enough people to act," Aldrich commanded with those slams on the table that had the sleepers startled away from whatever dream they tried to manage.

"They only have a population of fifty-thousand, and thirty-thousand of them have already been sent to aid the front with Destro!" Elizabeta joined in those hits.

"Then they have another ten-thousand to protect their own Kingdom from being attack by Khaos."

"Many of those twenty-thousand left are children and caretakers!"

Aldrich groaned and growled into the palm of his hands, rocking in a way that almost looked like he was defeated in tears.

Kandake sighed, "I'll send a messenger to see if there are more soldiers they can offer. If not, then we'll have to call soldiers back to defend." Kandake gazed to the latest numbers sent…it looked that perhaps she might have to send from her own people…it hurt and pained how less they had become by now.

"Tunisia in my kingdom is one of the closest provinces to them…I'll see if they can send from their own to help," Lili began, each time tiring, her eyes darkening and ready to fall to the pavement as she stood. Vincenzo, who had awoken and could not find it to rest again, stood and offered to give Lili the chance to sleep. She finished writing her message and headed off without a word.

Kiku, Louis, Arthur and Renata kept the current watch on Feliciano, close, Kiku at one point had even let himself rest on Renata's shoulder, and she smiled and caressed his arm. Feliciano still floated just the same, nothing of difference.

"Tomorrow is the fourth day," Renata reminded. "After, Feliciano should be heading to the second realm."

Kiku yawned, "do you think he's found something by now?"

A lulling silence, even Arthur and Louis beside them were struggling to keep their eyes open.

“I don’t know…we can’t really tell…”

“Forward! Forward!” Manuel shouted, many others spreading the message and thus the men and women, a mixture of Clubian and Diamond soldiers, stood before the strong winds Khaos blew in rage. At Manuel’s words, they extended their frontal leg forward and raised their hands in a defense posture for the spell. From the united magic and force of these thirty casters, long piercing pillars of emerald emerged from the ground to stand as a wall and hurt the large menace. Khaos was ready to fire with a demanding swish of his hand, but these walls did well to do nothing to the small creatures that laid behind.

“Now! Now! Now!” Antonio called, riding one of the long dragons that a Clubian infantry let him use. He raised a light in his hand and all ran and rode between the crevices of the pillars, Khaos before them clear to attack with many balls and rays of light that brought another shriek in this large plain.

“Fire!” A Diamond woman called from a distance, with a long line of Clubians with arrows, their ends with fire and magic, to add, targeted perfectly to blow with the light spells. In his anger, Khaos gained the energy he needed to completely crush the pillars. Many squashed horribly under him and their very own creations, yet still there were survivors who continued their light, the arrows joining in continuing to madden the Dark god.

Yong Soo could have met his end at the ground underneath him, but to his luck, Zuma came in his own St. Mark, catching him so he could ride as comfortably as he did. “Did you do it?”

“It’s good and ready!” Yong Soo smiled greatly as if there wasn’t blood dripping from the side of his head and they weren’t right before a nine-hundred meters monster.

“Get out of there, you two!” Lukas shout came through a small device, a recent creation in the mess that had done them well.

They hurriedly flew off, at whatever range could save them from the coming blow. To activate it, Lukas used every particle of energy in his being, such a drain that had him falling, gone. Matthias was there to catch him before he hit the ground, sending other casters to finish the last piece, but luckily it worked. It shimmered in different colors, quite beautiful before it teared and pained. Destro screamed and fought on with the soldiers on ground that tried to stall the pace of his walk how they could.

Yong Soo and Zuma landed on what they considered command grounds, where messengers came and every act began. “We got some time! Now the healing wards can move,” Zuma told and messengers moved to get it done.

From their far off distance, they could only watch as Destro continued to convulse in the bomb and spell, hoping indeed that he could do so for the mere minutes they needed.

The darkness remained, the blue light of the line the only divide, the only ground, the only thing that made him aware of the steps he took.

He had begun to get used to the bodies floating around him, only stumbling and whimpering at the sight of people who were mere citizens, those who couldn't evacuate in time and were left in the crush. He tended to run past them, hurrying at a pace that still left him in the same nothingness.

It was hard to find an essence of time, but Feliciano knew that enough have had to pass. Perhaps two days?

He had walked on, not feeling any tiredness or drain in his legs. To spend some sort of time, he imagined and thought about the people he passed by, wondering their stories, remembering, hoping to find anybody he could give his condolences and help when he returned…if he ever did. No one else awoke, no other walking figure, it was only now that he reached some sort of difference.

Large chunks of buildings, teared, broken, from all kinds. Churches, schools, homes… stationary, their presence creating bigger glows that gave Feliciano ease. He came close, touching and feeling their smoothness, their crevices, their designs…he never though he would long so much to just touch something that didn't shock him in pain. He smiled true, exploring where the lines of this window could take him, still in his frontal path, on and on until…big green open eyes, startled, a clear gasp, a figure…a moving figure…running away. Feliciano startled himself, moving back, trying to calm down how frantic he had gotten. When he relaxed…the sudden realization.

"Someone! There's someone!" He shouted to himself, taking a run. "Wait! Wait! Wait!" He called and begged behind the rushing green figure, losing finally the single line he had made this entire journey, crossing and turning around all these different ruins as the figure continued to evade him and even try to hide.

"Please! Please! I need your help! It's a matter of saving the four kingdoms!" He hoped could convince, but yet they were running, the debris now growing larger, entire courtyards and tall pillars surviving here. It made it easier for the other to hide, to lose himself between in clear knowledge of where he was, Feliciano easily losing sight of him.

No…no, he couldn't loose a chance like this!

He stopped, a realization and then a groan at understanding the idea he had. How he hated it…but if it meant he could get this person to stop…

"Halt! I order you to stop and come to me in the name of the Queen of Hearts, Feliciano Valenti of Italy!" He shouted in strong command…just as Ludwig taught him.

Feliciano heard a distant gasp, the footsteps stopped…and they started again, coming close, the figure shy in showing itself, slowly peeking from the crumble of a wall. It just wasn't his eyes that were green…the top of his head was green…his skin, his light, even the hands that slowly came up to hold themselves, pulling him slightly more up to reveal how even his body was in the same color. With the brightness of his shoulder length sleek hair, Feliciano

imagined that in his life it must have been blond. He wore a long flourishing blouse, with a vest rich in floral sewing even to his boots, and fine jewelry. Clubian…as if the mere color wasn't proof enough to show his kingdom.

"…your majesty…it's you…it's really you…" then he was confident enough to show himself completely, lithe, about Feliciano's own height…he wasn't resting…or producing light to offer to this realm…he was just as Feliciano that moment. "But you can't be! If you're here… then that must mean you're-"

"I won't be."

Astounded eyes, riddled in question, already asking for the Queen to answer.

"I'm not actually supposed to be dead. My body is currently in a pool in the Berlin castle being watched. I'm here to look for the power of the universal alignment. Once I get it, my mother will release me from a spell, and I can go back and do the job I was prophesied to do!" He rushed and panicked.

The other looked perturbed and he shone on with more questions.

"I don't have any time to loose. Please, just tell me what you know and anything that can help me!"

With the silence that came, Feliciano worried the man didn't understand well the common language, but he was thinking, debating. "So…you're not some spy trying to trick me?"

"No, no, no! Why would there even be spies here?!"

"Okay, yeah, maybe not spies, but there are some creepy stuff going on from time to time, I mean, just look at you!"

Did he have some extra appendage? No, he looked down to himself and only saw his usual. He was to comment on it, but then comparing, he realized that he still kept his own colors. His hair was still brown, his skin maintained its bronze cream, his boots black, his pants and simple blouse shirt in white. The only difference was his silhouetted red glow, and still it did not fill him in completely.

"From who I've met here, you're only supposed to awaken once all your magic is drained in here." His green outlook was the proof of all magic gone, the shell of a person's spirit. "If you're like this, then either your magic is still with you, which is just weird…or some other crazy crap I don't know about," he wailed his hands showing his frustration.

"I don't know either! The book didn't mention something like this and after-" he realized something in what he just said. "Wait! From who you've met? You mean there are others!"

"Oh yeah, tons! All of us who've woken up and are waiting for the second realm."

"Please, take me to them! They might know something."

“I doubt it. Most of them are as confused as I am. There’s really nothing out there helping or explaining anything to us. I came her actually trying to find someone who could or just someone who woke up and needs to calm down.”

“Then please, take me to them! Perhaps together we can work something out,” he neared already providing a warm comfort, one that made the other smile, already accepting.

“Well, come on then! We’re not too far, hopefully. We try to stay by recognizable stuff, so we won’t get lost.” He started a route that Feliciano happily followed behind. He didn’t know if this could actually lead to finding out something, but it was still very nice to just meet somebody else, talk and have company.

“Feliks Łukasiewicz. From Clubs if that isn’t obvious enough. Province of Poland,” he introduced.

“Feliciano Vale-”

“Yes, yes, you already introduced yourself all haughty and mighty. Everyone knows who you are, and you will give everyone quite the surprise once they see you. Man, how cool is that, meeting the Queen of Hearts here and on some special mission. I wish I could tell Toris that.”

It was a long walk, hours surely, much easier as they now had this debris around them to landmark. Feliks knew his way around, with ease, sometimes whistling or chatting on. Feliciano deeply appreciated it, even joining in song or talking of the lifestyle in the castle, something that Feliks constantly asked on.

“Eight cooks!”

“The main ones at least. Each one has around eight helpers.”

“And, like…do they make absolutely, everything you like?”

“Everything!” Feliciano smiled, already missing it…back before the war, before bearing, when Ludwig…he shouldn’t let himself wallow like that, not when he found this sudden happiness here.

“I bet you never had to go to the kitchen.”

“Actually, I do love cooking and sometimes went there myself to make my own food. Many times, I’ve actually fed all who were in my table.”

“Wow. If I had a team like that in my kitchen, you would never catch me there.”

Feliciano chuckled, “there was a time, back in my year of arising, where all I wanted to do was stay there…at the time I was avoiding my King.” The miss, the lessening of his spirit, holding his hands to himself as control to not fall so deep in that misery. Feliks now had to keep his glance on him, worried and wondering. “…but later,” he smiled again, the sweet of the memory giving his cheeks a pinkish glow that made Feliks slightly jealous on Feliciano’s kept colors. “…he would bake me the sweetest cakes…. he would try to make them tall, all

because he remembered how as a child he used to say he would one day make them reach the ceiling for me, and well, it was just fun."

Feliks didn't know how to answer, brought into silence, only continuing his heading, that memory of the Queen bringing him to his own memories of the same nature. He sighed, "I guess I know the feeling. A…friend of mine lived pretty far from me, a good three-day coach ride further north. When we were young, we would only see each other once every three months and…we couldn't stand being so long without the other. He did a short apprenticeship in Washington in Spades and when he came back, he brought this… contraption with him that could bring him way faster to me…only mere hours. I think it was called a…bicycle or whatever. Even if he did have something that made him come more often and quicker, it was still a hard route and many hours of peddling, but…he always came to see me no matter." He didn't need to blush in red, Feliciano could somehow see it glow on him with a beautiful green. It made him smile and ease, letting that moment one to appreciate sacrifices and devotions. He was to ask more on this man, but a diverse glow in the distance caught his attention. It was people…awake, moving, many of them, all shinning in different colors and huddled under the ruins of an old dome.

"That's them! Come!" Feliks rushed them those last steps.

They weren't paying attention to their approach, instead, they focused on the sleeping body of a young girl, a mere teenager, in her last descend down, slowly coming into their arms. Only her arm was left in her old colors, the rest of her now in blue. In one last small shock, the last of her magic was gone and she was completely drained. She fell into the arms of another young man, this one full in yellow. From what Feliciano could tell in his clothes, he was of the highest aristocracy in Diamonds.

"Be sure to be careful," one woman in blue told him and he nodded, being gentle as she opened her eyes, gave small groans, looking how she could, trying to make sense. Not recognizing anybody, not understanding where she was, she instantly drew into a panic, sitting up, breathing again harsh and hurting. The man began to soothe, rubbing a hand on her back, calm, something that the rest showed, beginning to give space. Feliks and Feliciano did well to remain in the back. Feliks had seen this happen enough times to know, while Feliciano took the time to see it for the first time and understand.

"We wish you no harm, we only want to help. Please, tell us your name."

She refused to, shaking her head, untrusting.

"I am Aaron Harbia of Diamonds. The province of Emirates. I am here because I got too close…too close to the furies of Khaos along with a large division of my men and women. I was wiped under him and now I'm here. Do you know where you are?"

The girl's breathing slowly relaxed, yet she fretted and shook as if she was attacked by a big cold. "I-I'm…I'm…Sam! Sam Kimura of Spades. The island of Anguila in the Oralee. I….I don't know. Where…where am I?"

"Do you not know?"

She couldn't recognize anything, nothing of what she had known or knew.

"Darling," the near blue woman came down, offering her comfort along Aaron's, "you're in the Interludes. You have begun a process of death…"

She stilled…so hurt, lost more than ever even when the answer was given to her.

"No…no…no, I can't be!" She teared, having nothing to hold but to Aaron, taking a harsh grip of his jacket, the kind of force that would have torn if they were back in the living world. "My father would have found me…he wouldn't have let me…he wouldn't have let me alone…he didn't know…he didn't know…" she was wallowing now, in hardships that didn't let her speak more. They all gave her that space, understanding well what she was going through.

"Most of us awake just like this," Feliks told Feliciano in the lowest whisper he could manage. "At least she has us now…most are not so lucky."

"You can tell us what happened. It might help," a man in green neared.

They waited until she calmed down, until her breathing eased enough to the point she could speak coherently. "My…my father was called to fight. He…wasn't so good at fighting…only sailing as all Oralee should and should only do. My family…we begged him not to go, that it was all under control, that we were sure the Kings, Queens and Jacks could manage on their own. But as things got worst, as news of a second monster came, as messengers arrived begging for new people to go and fight…my father wanted to obey to some…sense of calling and pride that I still don't get." She whimpered that moment, lost again. More they waited for her voice to come back. "He left with that group…and I couldn't take it…so I followed after him, dressed to look older…they were so desperate and worried that they didn't give me a second glance to know if I was age appropriate or not. I followed him the entire time, across the sea, across Spades, I think…I think we reached Clubs when…I saw him…I saw him…" she trembled now in utter fear, those who were there understanding, the very reminder making them sweat and shake, the air becoming somber. "They planned to do a surrounding on two of his sides, with Gegen spells, then fire the Sloan cannons…we were part of the huddle. I tried to stay close to him…and I did…but…I'm not old enough to do Gegen spells, I couldn't do it. I was trying so hard to do one that I didn't notice his closeness…it wasn't until part of my armor disintegrated that I saw the darkness that came, eating and tearing apart everything in its path. My father called for me…he saw me…I know he tried to come for me…but…all I remember after that is pain and darkness…and…now I'm here…" The telling of her story helped to relax her…to come into acceptance of where she was, the ease she was currently in and the comfort of these strangers that surrounded her.

"I'm…so sorry this happened to you. If there is anything we can do, and it is within our reach, we'll offer it," the blue woman said.

She thought of something, debating if the answer would be to her liking or hurt, "…my father…have you seen my father here? His name is Justo Kimura. We look very similar, but he has very long dreadlocks and a scare on his chin…he-he'll tell you it was from a fishing accident as a kid."

“I’m sorry, but we haven’t found anybody of that description yet,” Aaron told her.

“If he is not here, then take joy that he is still alive and well,” a diamond woman told.

“I…I really don’t think so. We were both under the same darkness.”

“If he is here, it could be that he is still asleep,” a Heartian man guessed.

“Not to worry, child. You will meet him, I’m sure of it. All who die must come here.”

That was a realization that widened Feliciano and brightened his eyes. “Of course…why didn’t I think of it sooner? Ludwig…it means …Ludwig has to be here!” He smiled large and loud, turning and hoping to see him that instant. His loud proclamation could not be ignored, all taking a glance to the back wondering.

Many gasped and fretted.

“It’s the Heartian Queen!”

“Wha-what?”

“You-you-your majesty!”

“No! No! You’re supposed to be in Berlin. You weren’t fighting in the war!”

“Don’t worry! I’m not really dead! But Ludwig! Ludwig! I have to find him! I just have to!”

“Wait! Wait! Your majesty!” A Spadian woman called and came near when Feliks couldn’t take a grasp of him.

Feliciano halted, lost again, not knowing where to look, where to go…for a moment he forgot that he was here to look for something else…not his King. He realized how fretful he was being, especially after what the girl went through, embarrassed to show himself.

“Sir, the King died many weeks ago,” the Spadian woman reminded, “…he shouldn’t be in the first realm anymore.”

Like being taken away from him again, Feliciano gripping, hating how easily he could still tear up at his fault.

“But…it is possible he could be in the second one,” Feliks came close and smiled up to him, a comforting hand on his shoulder, trying to pull him back, to their company…what he wanted…help and the presence of others.

Feliciano gave him a grin, taking a deep sigh, telling himself to be patient…and focus on what he came here to do. He turned to the rest, showing himself…the others transfixed at how he kept his own colors, shinning unique and truly queenly. Even Sam, in her curiosity and wonder, managed footing again, standing and joining the rest in their impression.

Feliciano came back, nervous and unsteady, but trying out a smile that was offering. “I apologize. It was very rude of me to cut in like that.”

“You are desperate to find someone you love…especially after you thought you’d never see them again…” Sam said, shy…she had never been before the presence of royalty. “I understand…and I guess, we should all help each other to achieve that.”

“That’s a plan I’ll gladly be a part of.”

“First of all, your majesty, I would love to understand what you’re doing here. You mentioned you’re not really dead. What is going on?” Aaron could stand again, his direction towards him like the rest.

“I…I don’t know what you were informed, but I was unable to get the power of the universal alignment. Ludwig was really worried about me…especially after finding out I was bearing…” He liked that he didn’t have them so obvious here, people’s gazes wouldn’t go so quickly to them, they could pay attention to him and what he had to say. “He trapped me at the bottom of the castle without any reach to the outside so I wouldn’t dare go back to the war and risk myself. But…afterwards, we…found a way to get it again…and it involved coming here to the Interludes.”

“So…you killed yourself to get it?” The Spadian woman questioned.

“Well…yeah, kind of, but, it was carefully planned in the suggested way. My body right now is being held under a spell in a place I can come back to once I get it. And when I do…I can face Khaos and Destro and put an end to all of this.”

Silence as they all gazed between themselves, taking the time to understand and realize.

“What do you need now?” Another Heartian woman came forward, ready to act and do what was needed.

“Information. What do you know of here? How is the second realm reached? The books mentioned that the arsenal of power is in a deep connection between the first and fourth realm. What does it mean?”

And they all thought and gathered in their minds all they have recently found out.

“Out of all of us, I have been the longest here.” Aaron offered himself, coming forward to answer. “As I’ve learned of my time here, when you arrive, you are in this deep sleep while your magic is drained. As soon as it’s done, you awaken in the state we are in and linger still in the first realm. I assume I’ve been here about five days. I did meet this lady from the White Kingdom…from those who had been fighting. She was the one who found me and helped me to calm down. After she reached about a week here…she suddenly…” They all came close, eager. “It was like she got frozen…her eyes were covered in light. I tried to speak to her, anything to get her off it, but she stayed…then the next moment, she had her arms spread open and she was swallowed down into the water.” He pointed to the very ground they stood on, all fearful as if it was ready engulf them that instant. “I haven’t seen her since.”

“It has to be…” One spadian woman worded what all had begun to make certain.

“But we can’t be sure…until it happens to us,” Feliks reminded that they were still intended to head on that very same faith.

“Anything else?” Feliciano hoped for. “Anybody else out of the ordinary…anything…that explained to you more of what’s in here…Angels…even an Ace...”

By the emptiness, Feliciano could already tell there was no such answer.

“It has only been us…” she then looked around…the ruins, some bodies floating by, yet the darkness, “…and this,” the Diamond woman replied, bringing dread to Feliciano, already feeling like he was back at the beginning, lost in nothing and alone.

“It will happen to all of us though…the second realm…perhaps there you can find the answers you need…” Sam tried to alight him, and although it raised his eyes and a smile…it was not closer to what he needed.

Chapter 75

“There will be no discussion. I accept the order to mobilize these seven hundred men and women from the Indian province. Write to Yekaterina and let her know that they are to be expected,” Elizabeta commanded.

“They were so recently created. I’m not sure if it will be safe,” Lili debated at the letters asking for permission on usage on these new cannons created by desperate soldiers from her kingdom.

“Lili, at this point, we take anything we can get,” Kiku commented over his own glide of hands as he tested spells and tricks.

“Accept the command and move on to the next thing!” Arthur suggested in the hurry he had turned into comfort the last few days.

As this commotion occurred, Louis focused on changing the number above.

Four days since Feliciano left them to the Interludes, this day the one he was meant to enter the second realm if the writings and their knowledge were correct.

“We should start mourning this instant,” Kandake decreed.

Lovino was quick to deny, “but we are not sure if-”

“Whether he is or not, it will work the same way. We must be rash. We can’t lose a single moment no matter our doubts,” she placed them and no more disobeys came.

They all took their positions to start, some sitting while others stood, but no matter, they kept a focus and a gathering of magic that was equal.

“Are you all ready?” Louis called to those who worked in the back.

Arthur especially groaned, knowing that the Queens and Jack will have to make dual duties, yet they nodded in agreement with the rest.

They began it with a push that they all answered to in unison, an easy flow that didn’t really disturb anything in the room.

But it wasn’t meant to act in this world.

Feliciano joined in the help to find others, to instruct and to calm, reaching a routine in such a short amount of time.

All they had was speech, and so it was with words that they spent their time. He learned so much of the lives of different people, attentive and exciting, earning a rumble of laughter

many did not expect to have in such a dreaded place. And then there were moments like these, spent in silence, in getting to know these breaths that they lived on in this world. Feliciano felt comfort spending his sitting with Feliks and Sam, the girl ever so attentive in the likeliness she could meet her father here again, while Feliciano hoped to see his beloved soon, looking to the distance, as if he could wave and greet him. For once, the memories of Ludwig he relayed were of joyful ones, where they laughed, danced and kissed in sweetness, hoping he would meet him as this again…and perhaps-

"Ah look, a new one just popped out," Feliks distracted and pointed him to the sudden light of a figure, coming in a fade afterwards. This one was a Spadian woman…a nurse. They looked away, not wanting to think, not wanting to believe.

Yet, despite, Sam couldn't hold her curiosity, "What must it be like now? What are they doing? …Have they found something that actually works now?"

Feliks held the same questions, while Feliciano put blame on himself, scolding for what hadn't worked, hoping for connection, for speech to the living world to keep on commanding anything new that could turn the tides. But what he could do…was be here…find this power bank and then be that change that would put an end to all of this. He sighed, wishing it could all be presented, fast and easy, and he wouldn't be tainted with this dread, feeling like his mere sitting was waste, disadvantaging while so many of his people lost their lives in dreadful massacres.

He changed his glance yet again from a new coming spirit, another Heartian soldier, wanting to find some peace in these two new friends he made, anything. "How long do you think you've been here, Feliks?"

He shrugged, "really hard to tell. I think maybe a week? But I really can't be so sure."

"We should be entering the Second Realm then," Feliciano slightly angered, impatient, glaring at the waters below as to cast blame.

"What do you think it's like?" Feliks distracted perfectly, easing Feliciano with thought.

"In my village, they used to say that it was brightly colored, beautiful and serene, with happiness glowing in every single street," Sam told.

"Street?" Feliciano perked.

"Some people told me there were bridges and buildings," Feliks added.

"Like…a whole town?" Feliciano glowed more like a child each add.

"What did they say in your village?" Sam wondered.

"They sometimes mentioned that it was a place of reunion…but also the last taste of your past life before you live on with the Aces," he remembered…all from retellings in his grandfather's funeral…nonno. "A book I read also mentioned that we become more aware, understanding our new spirit bodies. We stay there depending on length of mourning. It can

sometimes take several months…but the other Queens told me they can't keep me too long… I still have to look for the arsenal…and maybe I can find something in the third or fourth realm."

It made Feliks reminded, "will we stick together throughout?"

How Feliciano hoped it so, wanting to grasp their arms with him to keep them in place.

It had been such a short time, but Feliciano found comfort of old friends in them, hope in words and exchange that reminded of life and continuation no matter. But there was a harsh reality. The three of them deceased at different times, which signified different entrances… separation. Feliciano grasped at his legs, not wanting to think of that loneliness that would surely come, coming to a new place, new people…

"you've done this all before," he could somehow hear his grandfather's voice at the back of his head and he smiled and giggled as if he was there to tickle or tell a new joke.

Oh…how he missed him too.

"…I don't know, but whatever happen, let's promise that we will move ahead and face it on bravely-" there was suddenly light, blinding light that Feliciano was laid frozen to. He saw nothing, absolutely nobody in this utter whiteness, so drastic from the darkness he had been used to. No sound, no aware or reach. He didn't know of the shout Sam gave, of her begging, a call, not wanting to be alone. Feliciano couldn't answer to anything, suspended, draped entirely in this taking that took him further, drowned him yet again in transport to the next step. There was a rush, a force that kept him from acting against it as he slowly started noticing more of his body, of his presence. The light began to dim, in a cleanse…Feliciano released from it as if he was stepping out from the richly prepared waters of his bath.

The first color he noticed…was rose, creamy, and soothing like gelato or roses. There was gold, blue, all beautifully reflected in these new waters he stepped on. No depths, but the lovely reflection. He was at such peace, freshness anew that he couldn't bother to think of where he had been and this new place he found himself in.

This new world focused slowly, hesitant in the show to his eyes, which Feliciano did not understand, for it was gorgeous, a plethora of beauty that made him smile, elate, and only reveal his interior happiness.

The silhouette in the distance, one he had paid no mind to till now, cleared enough to reveal…buildings, all together into what seemed like an island. It was complete, structured, and behaving like any town in their living world. There was sound, shouts and commotion like the daily of a Sunday, more of these islands further off, a transport of small boats commuting between, the sailors joyous and giving.

Hesitant steps forward, making sure the water underneath him kept him…they did. They only reflected the sky above him, swirling with the puffiest clouds, welcoming, and asking of him for this run in freedom. And he answered to it, with a bright smile as he took his dash, uncaring, dancing and shouting. It had been long since he had last felt like this.

It's when he noticed the red sash wrapped around his waist, a long part like a ribbon trailing behind him, his pants a rich silk of red, his shirt a long white blouse with an immaculate embroidery of true gold, crossed and tightening his chest high and proud, shinning more than whatever richness the castle could afford. He twirled, he shouted, feeling like a true Queen again, reigning this moment and making it all for him to take.

Soon, he stood before the shadow of this place, feeling again those deep questions and fears, shy to take those small steps that welcomed him, further…into the streets. Well…it wasn't really a street…it was but a small path that surrounded a larger canal, diving well into this town's center, the buildings looking tall, the shadow darkening, yet still so sweetly with the proximity of children laughing. He saw no one near…even if he swore he could hear the chatter of woman with gossip…all in a Italian that made him smile and think he was back at home. It was the thought that finally pushed him forward, steps on solid ground for the first time in the realms. He went on with no direction, only with wish to meet someone…anybody.

How could a place look so empty yet lively at the same time?

There was a commotion, a loud one of feast, the one unison of sound that called him forward the most. He peeked at every new corner, meeting more canals that extended all kinds of different directions, a large number of bridges, the streets small, each reveal with decorations, artistry and impeccable form that wondered and distracted Feliciano from his mission. Sometimes the noises went further or closer depending the miss he took, but always he tried to follow it until he caught the quick passing of a child, running across surely trying to catch another. And there was the biggest light, like the sun was shining right over it, to a large open space, he knew. It was all structured so similarly to those of Italy, an expectance that showed him right as he was exposed to the grandiose of this square.

It looked like the entire population of the town was there, for it was full in crowds, every space given to chats between all kinds of people, to running, to dancing, playing, even a large table presenting a lineage of food that was the expected delicacy of his province. Feliciano licked his lips, the scent taking him and already wanting a grasp at whatever first plate was presented before him. He could close his eyes and imagine himself back at Barga, with the same people, his family…Ludwig taking him to one of the many dances, to sway forward as he did into the light…lost in the memory and the image he gave himself.

A sudden gasp broke him from it…Feliciano noticing a little boy, looking up to him with grand perplexity, frozen, trying to understand or utter a single word. Feliciano, even if with the same fears and uncertainties, found his ever-friendly self, if shyly raising a hand and giving a pleasant, "ciao."

The boy moved back, trembling, yet not running off, biting lips trying to gather the courage to speak aloud, but instead, he began keeping his gaze to the ground and Feliciano feared he would not tell him anything. Too attentive he was he didn't notice the gasps, the points, how all these eyes began to slowly fall on him. Feliciano only wanted but to help the boy, kneeling to him, presenting himself even with an extended hand that showed that all was well, that there was peace in his approach.

"I am not here to hurt anybody…all I want is a friend," he smiled as the words just sung out in Italian, with the serenity of this very square, and the boy smiled and jumped in its

acceptance.

“It’s…it’s an honor, your majesty,” he bowed as order he had to follow despite his childish giddiness.

Feliciano was surprised by this well-done curtsy, by his way of realizing, reminding Feliciano once again of who he was and what he surely meant…especially to a town where all seemed to be Italian. It was when he gazed to them, meeting them all at once, for they came closer, a large bewilderment, whispers but a low dim so he could be the loudest presence. He blushed and suddenly wished he could hide again in the darkened paths, but after all, he was Queen, and he had to shine the leader, brave and determined, even in this beautiful world of death. He reminded himself that he was still on a mission.

When he was about to speak aloud his words, there was a rustling between the crowds, these figures holding high spears of gold with banners of red and symbols of the Italian province. When these four came before the crowds, Feliciano couldn’t hold his gasp, awed and wondered at seeing actual angels.

They stood quite singularly wearing armors that had the intimidation of war, but the color and decoration of a feast as this. Their divine helmets of golds and red shone as deep as this sun, their wings large above the crowds. He couldn’t fathom such creatures taking a bow before him, while he looked so mundane and small, even with this newly pristine clothing.

“Sua Maestà,” one of them told with such a beautiful ring.

“It really is him,” another of the souls told.

“It cannot possibly be,” another worried.

“If he’s here, it means-”

“Oh, many of us are to come soon!” One already panicked.

“The world is truly coming to an end!”

Oh…this excessiveness was truly Italy, Feliciano couldn’t help the roll of his eyes.

“No! It is not as it seems!” One of the angels bellowed to hold such accusations, enough for silence to come again in the square.

“You cannot be dead,” another of the angels told with such glaring accusation that Feliciano trembled.

“We know it is not meant to be your time…you were not exposed to any dangers of the war and you had a promise from our Ace Augusta to fulfill,” the tallest came, with demand.

“You could only be here if you brought this upon yourself,” another angered, fearing that Feliciano had shown an exit to all his responsibilities.

Feliciano could not let himself be accused like this. “I am here looking for the power of the alignment.” It was not the answer the angels were expecting, for they widened and gazed between one another wanting more answers. “As you have guessed, I am not really meant to be dead. My body was placed on a force rest with the sole purpose of coming here and finding it so I can fulfill my promise to Augusta as it should be. I am meant to return once I have it.”

It was enough to sate their angers, for Feliciano’s own to be alone, the angels understanding for daring to assume. Yet despite announcing his reasons…silence came when he was expecting instant directions to where he had to go. These were angels…they had to know.

“As much as I would love to stay and enjoy…I am in a hurry. I cannot stay here long and so I have to know now…where is it?” No decorum, no explanation…he wanted it all simply brought. Oh…how different he must be from all. How much did he lose with Ludwig? Yet… this was the maturity and strength he had taught him well to show as Queen. He gripped his hands, wanting nothing but the hold of his hand.

He could be here…he could be near…he told himself. Get what he needed and rush to find him once the opportunity was presented.

“The universal alignment?”

“Yes. You must know that it is a matter of the lives and wellbeing of our world. Please, I have to get it!” By this point he begged, coming closer to show it purposely, the angels settling back, disturbed.

“Impossible. You should have gotten it when the universe aligned. You were in Hearts, in the living, we know-”

“I couldn’t,” Feliciano interrupted before they went on.

“How? How could you have missed it?” An angel came close, feeling betrayed.

“Locked. Under a validity sphere field.”

Clear gasps, widened reactions, the angels moving as the crowd did.

“Who did this?” They demanded.

“My king…Ludwig…he did it trying to protect me.”

“And where is he?”

“…isn’t he…here?”

There were more shocks, the angels unmoving. They breathed, they tried to find some sense, words, carrying it all into an order…before this party went on disturbed with the news and simply because Feliciano was there.

“We have not seen Ludwig. As you have surely noticed, this island only takes those deceased that were from the Italian province in Hearts. The one for Germany is right across ours,” the angels pointed to the canals that could take him there if he so wished. “If he is here…then…that is where he will be.”

“But I tell you now…we have not heard of his arrival.”

“When did he pass?”

“Many...many weeks ago.”

Another angel sighed, “then we should have known by now. Messages between one another is constant.”

“He might…he might be trying to hide…or…maybe the angels there didn’t want anybody to know, or he’s just…he’s just…” Feliciano tried to excuse, tried to find reason, a way.

“You are welcomed to go there and find out for yourself.”

A chance Feliciano could have taken that instant if the angels did not continue with the rest of the dire information.

“Now…the universal alignment,” one angel thought and tried to think of a way she could explain herself along with her companions. “While it is true that all power that dies is preserved for a short time here when it passes…”

“We can’t really…give you a specific location of where it is.”

“Why? I told you it’s dire. If you care about the wellbeing of all these people, then you can tell me, and I can save all of them!”

“Sua Maestà, it’s not exactly in a location you can just go to!”

“But the book said that it is present here in a unique connection!”

“Exactly, unique and singularly! Not even we can give you directions to it.”

Feliciano gripped and tried hard not to weep that instant. It was becoming harder each new realm…even when he had the presence of four angels before him. “How do I manage it? How can I come to it?” He still had to keep going, still had a mission. No matter the process, he had to head to it.

The air had been tense, but the angels admired this new Queen’s tenacity, relaxing, letting it now be something of serenity and the peace this feast had been trying to achieve. “As we said and…what information you have found, the arsenal is not exactly a place that you can get to. Yes…it can be reached, but it’s not easy. It moves, it challenges, and it presents depending on how worthy it sees you.”

“Are we…talking about a person then?” Feliciano guessed.

“No…only a place that has a mind of its own, constantly moving and refusing to abide by any command.”

“Not even for a desperate plea to save the world.”

Feliciano sighed, “then what would I have to do to please it?”

The angels worried over the sure answer they had, but nevertheless, it had to be told, even if they knew the Queen wouldn’t like it. “We only know of some words the Aces gave us right at the beginning concerning it…but they never thought it would be needed to us.”

“And after their experience with Keron, they preferred such powers were better kept intact, away from any traitors in their mists. We didn’t learn more on its meaning to show our loyalty and our disinterest on such a thing.”

“You won’t find anyone who can solve it. The answer, you must find for yourself.”

Feliciano nodded and accepted to what this challenge could be, a strong determination that told the angels it was focused and serving.

“The words are simple: The four stances of the four kingdoms. What the Aces awarded in creation. What a King must abide in their kingship. What a Queen should keep in their ambition. What a Jack needs to serve without condition. And what the people raise to tradition.”

Feliciano was shocked at himself for not providing an answer so simply. He held his words, cursing at himself for not knowing such a basic structure of ruling.

The four stances of the four kingdoms…they had to be there… he was sure he had been taught…but no matter how deeply he searched his mind…it didn’t come evident.

What kind of Queen, an Ace even, did not know the four stances? He wanted to kneel and cry at the embarrassment of not having the knowledge before four angels. They should punish him that instant for such insolence. But no pierce had come, not even words, just a peaceful silence that kept this realm a wonder and a soon taste of heaven.

“It’s not just knowing what the four stances are, it’s showing them true in a way the arsenal can accept.”

“I know all of this must be incredibly hard on you…and it only get’s worst…”

“But you can do it!” A woman from the crowd bounced forward.

“You have to! So many depend on you!”

“Please, sirs, is it possible for us to help,” one woman dared come forward, an offering that already wanted to be fulfilled.

“You may try. But remember all…every word we’ll tell him will be useless if he has not learned to show it himself,” one angel loudly reminded to all.

“We will try our best,” one man offered.

“Very well. May I also remind, that like many of you, Feliciano will only be here a limited time. A month only if I am not mistaken. Use your time wisely, welcome him, tell him how we live so he is prepared. Your majesty,” the four turned to him simultaneously, beautiful and a pure majesty that Feliciano thought he was going to drown under. “Good luck, and may you find what you are looking for.” And in graceful swifts they turned and made a militant pace through the crowds, all offering an artistic path for them to take. The four of them went separate directions, different corners of the island. Once they reached the edges, they took flight, one Feliciano only saw dimly of, for they soon disappeared to whatever perch they needed to take to continue their watch over the island.

All had kept to Feliciano’s silent watch, all in his same wonder if they were going to come back and guide more on this journey. Nothing else occurred, no other new presence came, it was now just the very crowd Feliciano had entered to.

A near woman sighed and gave up on this waiting, turning to the Queen, bowing before offering a hand. “I understand there is much you have to do, but for now, come and join us! Enjoy the festivity only for today …So many would like the chance to know you and spend time with you…”

He should refuse, he should walk away and begin his focus that moment. But…the food looked so delicious, the square beautiful, the people wonderful and the activities were surely there to set him aglow. It was an utopia made by his people, meant as the last taste of their culture before they passed on and surely left it behind. Perhaps he needed this moment to be Italian, be himself and take part with his own kind if just for a day.

The little boy came close, at his side, looking up to him as if he were another angel of guidance, inspired, taking his hand, and wanting to be part of that exposure. Feliciano was slightly startled after he had been so lost in his mind, but he welcomed it quickly with a dear smile. He joined in a tighten grasp, thinking back to the dim jewels in his hands and more than ever wishing he could finally hold his children in his arms. But for now, he turned to his people, all yet still so impressed to be at the presence of a Queen, one of their own, their eyes with many curiosities and excitements to spend whatever chance they could with him. Feliciano grinned and walked forward to grant it to them.

Lively chatter began again, many played, many danced and sang, and oh had Feliciano missed having some ricotta stuffed ravioli, the taste and scent there so real it made him forget that he was but a spirit in in the Second Realm.

Chapter 76

Chapter Notes

> This is the quickest I've had a chapter up in a long time. All thanks to some three weeks of holiday that are ending Wednesday-Thursday :'D By then it's the usual writing pace I had before. Not to worry! Updates always come!

The next two days somehow blurred to Feliciano. He felt like he had been stuck in the same place…when he had only been there for perhaps only an hour, breathing and hoping this ease could bring hm an answer. He laid his feet upon the surface of this canal, sometimes starring off into the blur of this other island. It was the German one they had told him several times, boats occasionally coming here to pick up anyone who wanted a visitor…yet the last few times he had denied the passage still trying to think, trying to piece as time passed.

Yes, it darkened and lightened here in the usual day and night cycle, the night a splendorous one of black, purple, blue and infinite of stars that sparkled elegantly on the waters. One lived here like any other regular life, with the same pass times and leisure, easy to forget that they were dead and only waiting for a mourning to pass so they could enter the third realm. Everyone reverted to the colors of their life, only glistening, and brightening, for, as someone had told him, you have shed your magic and your spirit can shine straight anew. But indeed, since all your magic was drained in the first realm, you had no power here, but it didn't disturb from the utter peace and felicity. People went on, Feliciano wondering if they had forgotten they once could possess such force.

For some reason he had kept his own magic…but he preferred keeping it hidden. He didn't know what it meant, how the people would react to it and what the angels would say. So, he settled to himself that if he had to use it, then small things that can fit in the palm of his hand.

The angels only came when new people entered or when they had to pick someone to lead them in their entrance to the third realm. He never saw the full process, he would only see as the angel would come to someone, talk, lead them deep into the most darkened street in the town, disappear between and that person never came back. They always went alone, no matter the family household they made in their time in the island.

They had established these families to make the settling easier, to have a group to count on and spend your time until you were called. Feliciano had found it with a group that called themselves Galdi, the one to which the little boy he had met belonged to.

His name was Timoteo…only five years old when he passed. He was from Ragusa, at the south of the peninsula and thus very far from Barga. He had been heavily sick with an immune problem that he suffered from since birth. The youngest of three siblings, his parents working with the governance of the town. The four of them had tried hard to deal with his

disease, but the war cut the route of medicines and the healers that helped. His eldest sister left to fight in the war, the sadness taking the largest toll that eventually led him here.

When Feliciano had heard the story, he broke and put on himself more blame for the occurrence of the war, so many times apologizing and wishing he could grant the boy his life back. Timoteo forgave him, smiling and mentioning how he suffered no pain, in a wonderful place with just as great people and had even met the Queen of Hearts.

Yet it didn't heal the fault, it still added to the weigh of what he was supposed to do. This tension always lay with him, grasping as he did now the edges of his seat as he forced himself more the words he had gotten to.

The four stances…could be so many things. Care, Devotion, Empathy, Belief, Force, Magic, Openness, Knowledge…and on and on with countless of words that piled and yet none shone out to him as the intended. He needed a way to make them clear, so when he worked on showing it…he wouldn't be doing the wrong one.

Okay, um… Intent, Loyalty, Calculation, Anger…he spun on words, twisting them around himself, hoping they could show.

Wish, Leadership, Serenity, Force…another sigh in his anguish, just as Timoteo took the sitting right next to him, by now knowing Feliciano's concentrations on this, remaining silent, gazing up to him wondering if perhaps this time he had something. He knew Feliciano had given up when he moved his gaze away from the waters, up to the distance that gave him the next coming island.

"I asked Giancarlo if he had any ideas this morning, and he suggested you asked Augusta."

Oh…if only it was that easy. "Augusta won't answer me…" he tried to control his exasperation, no worth being shown to a child.

"She lives within you…shouldn't she…shouldn't she help you."

Feliciano rolled his eyes and wished he could tell her that as well. "Timoteo…she might want me to learn it myself. After all, I'm Queen, I should know this by nature…yet I don't…she might also be disappointed because so."

"No…maybe she's just making a game," he had thought like the child he was and Feliciano chuckled and blessed that he was there with him.

"Wouldn't that be fun?" He raised his legs to himself, now taking a break, thoughtful and only one person in his mind, his gaze now more intent than ever on that specific canal that connected. Timoteo knew…and he waited and even expected Feliciano's decree to row forward…yet silence continued between them.

"Why haven't you gone to the German island yet?" He asked, slow as to not cause any more distress…he could tell Feliciano was hesitant. "King Ludwig is supposed to be there…right? Maybe he can help you."

“Yes…he is supposed to be there…but…” he sighed and saddened like he could melt to the floor in it. “It was as the angels said…if he were here then they would have known…a message should have arrived there of my presence… if Ludwig would have heard it…he would have come as quick as possible…but it’s been two days and there’s been nothing of him.”

“…the angels suggested you could still check,” he wanted to believe.

“I could but…I’m afraid of what I can find out…you know the real story of Augusta and Romulus don’t you?”

He nodded excitedly, attentive, and glowing ready to hear the tale all over again.

“When Romulus passed by Khaos’s hand…he didn’t come here…for the longest time Augusta thought he had completely disappeared…lost and truly left without a chance to see him again…” what dreadful things, what misery…he shouldn’t be telling this to a child…yet Timoteo continued to gaze up to him with big innocent eyes, unperturbed by the words.

“And you’re worried that the same thing has happened.”

And the very words he had been thinking, not daring to say out loud, were whisked into the air by the young boy. “…he…was killed by Khaos…I doubt he would be so merciful.” And he turned away, not wanting the island to give him false hopes.

Yet despite how everything seemed so unlikely…Timoteo wanted to keep that hope. “I can go with you if you want, so no matter what you find…I’ll try to help you and…we can figure something out.” He didn’t know what…but he wanted to keep Feliciano faithful to the chance of seeing Ludwig again…even if it meant not in the Interludes…even when there wasn’t a single way.

Feliciano sighed, straightened up and there was intention in the way he gazed that made Timoteo know they were meant to take the next coming boat.

The Queen realized that the boy had truth in discovering more of what this could be. No matter what he would find out…he was sure it would not stop him from searching a way.

The sailor who was in the boat that transported Feliciano and Timoteo couldn’t stop stuttering his words, wouldn’t stop bowing…or staring intensively at the Heartian Queen. Feliciano giggled and tried to give him as much ease as he could on the journey…a half hour one with a lot to witness in these waters as they crossed.

Despite how these boats could hold the weight of bringing about twelve spirits, only one person rowed, their oars the only thing in this realm that trespassed the water reflection under them to push. From what Feliciano had learned, these rowers were not angels, but spirits who had lived themselves long ago, had passed all four realms, lived with the Aces and were granted this job once there. They either wished it or it was given as a sort of punishment for wrong doings they did in their past life. They were knowledgeable in the map of this world,

their rower pointing and naming the other islands they witnessed from afar. But each soul was limited specific routes, and this one in particular could not go further to the islands they couldn't see or the ones from other kingdoms.

With each paddle forward, Feliciano became heavier, his expression more fallen, the sailor and even Timoteo distracted in the conversations of other passengers to really notice. The island began to come clearer, with building of stone and wood that showed the clear artistry unique to the German province. It was a mix of old and new, of city and country, and it reminded Feliciano of one of the inner streets of Berlin. The beauty made him blissfully forgetful, ignorant to a crowd of people that were surely awaiting friends or even loved ones. The surprise was soon quickly spread as they witnessed him. The usual whispers Feliciano had now been used to arose, but he didn't bother to listen or give attention at first. He rose out of the boat, helping Timoteo to stand at his closeness, making sure they were both well suited in their arrival before Feliciano could turn to the crowd…taking a deep breath and preparing himself for the answer he would get.

"Greetings," he started and continued in German, "despite how it might seem, I am not really dead." He went on with the usual information of his journey until all could understand the circumstances to not create a massive panic.

"We understand well, your majesty. But why come to our island?" A man had wondered for all.

"I…" and here it would come, his voice coming into a shake, gripping his hands, and biting his lips from not showing more this weakness. "I'm looking for my husband."

Startlement, all exchanging confused glances, then searching between one another, wondering if simply they had missed him.

"King Ludwig?"

"Yes, is he here? If so, then please, take me to him! I have to see him!" He begged, his eyes watered now, a reaction the men and women moved back from…not understanding what to do, what to say. Timoteo took a stronger hold of his hand, easing him, reminding to be patient and attentive.

"Your majesty, we know our dear king was taken…but…"

"We…believe he's already in the third or fourth realm…maybe with the Aces…" one tried to alight.

"No…it doesn't make sense. With the amount of time Ludwig has been dead…he should be here…I know he should be here…" Feliciano insisted, thinking they were only hiding him, ready to dash forward and look for himself.

"Your majesty!" One woman told the loudest, taking well his attention as she stood high and mighty in the crowd, understanding well…Feliciano could tell that currently she has been the longest there, perhaps only hours to be chosen for her path to the third realm. "Ludwig is not

here…and he hasn't been here…" harsh words, enunciated and sure that Feliciano had no way to denying. The tears fell and his breath began to hitch.

"Emilie, be reasonable, perhaps-" one tried to alight.

"I've long been here…and no king has come…and none of the people I was with at the beginning mentioned such a presence."

Timoteo's heart hurt for Feliciano, who now began to shake in his hold, and he looked up to him vastly worried. Even with his grasp, Feliciano looked lost, ready to suffocate at the harshness his breathing increased in.

He should have expected this…he shouldn't be surprised, it shouldn't be suffocating him like this.

"Not here…not here…" Feliciano repeated in anguish.

But he did have hope…his heart truly believed he would be there so everything could be the same as it was…but now…no…such a chance was never to occur again…Ludwg suffered the same faith as Romulus…he was gone…he was gone…gone…gone…

"I'm so sorry, your majesty…we would love to know what's going on also and help…but…there's nothing we can do…" someone tried to come close to give whatever comforts, but no matter, Feliciano began to loose focus, sweating from the harshness it took to breathe.

"Feliciano…Feliciano?" Timoteo tried to call, but it was like he was slowly disappearing from his vision.

So many began to try and call for him, but he gave none an answer as his breath overcame everything else.

Roderich was surprised he could run this fast, could even let his legs raise him as he went across that ruined expanse. He was heavily bruised, blood coated his armor, yet he still managed some force to keep up with the other two.

"Ready?" An Oralee called, reminding him of the mission.

"We're even!" a Whitean joined.

Yes, the three of them were perfectly aligned, amazingly so as the ground crumbled underneath them, as ribbons of darkness danced about them, the feet of Khaos menacing ever closer with stomps that could have swallowed them all to be forgotten. But no…they were determined that this wouldn't be their end. With grimaces, with pain in every single one of their bones, they extended their hands in a perfect balance, a beam like rope being formed. They began to move apart, expanding the distance, sometimes wobbling as one jumped or dived to avoid a ribbon. Soon enough they had what they wanted, a perfect space, the three moving until it was targeted like a large bow.

“Fire!” Roderich shouted and they released just as they would an arrow, a field running up, the end a large shard that fell and pierced into Khaos. A scream, chilling and painful to hear, especially being this near. The monster began to bend in a nearing to the ground, to fall. The three smiled at achieving this, one of the rare times, but it was quickly vanished when they noticed it was ready to fall on them. From their awe, they had to dash at whatever space they could find.

The ribbons were coming at them fiercer, messed, and dangerous without control. They didn’t think it would be possible to pass through, closing their eyes and expecting the soon taking. But then came the insisting voice, along with the call that was unique of a specific kind of deer bread for the use of war as this. They were tall, imposing, fast and with antlers capable of taking many to death at a time.

“Come on! Come on! Come on!” Came the shout of the Jack of Diamonds, ushering them forward to him, all taking a grasp of the animal, safe and secure before it hasted away to the safest ground they could reach, the top of a mountain that they made their center of operations and health when it was not moving and possible. João was there to greet them, pen and scroll in his hand ready to write the next commands and messages.

“It worked…” the Oralee told, trying to catch her breath, “…but I don’t know how much time it gives us.”

“We got him to fall…it’s more than what we hoped for,” João told them in gratitude.

“We can’t waste anymore time. Hurry with the next part! There are still some towns here that need to be evacuated!” Vash reminded them all, with his deer, heading over to continue helping these people. The others went ahead, only João and Roderich remained, both to stare at both sides of the view they had.

The side were Khaos was wallowing in was filled with darkness, once such greet greens and rivers now in greys, smoke and only but cracked earth. Only some soldiers remained to fend and attack as continuous, preparing, swallowed and surely tearful with fear and mourning for their land. Roderich especially hurt…seeing his kingdom driven to this, a weeping he needed to hide…not now when there was still much to do, with Khaos still undefeated.

They turned to the other side, these mountains doing well to hide the towns and even city in the distance that needed to be hurried out and emptied this instant. What gave them more panic was the fact that they could see the Spadian border from here, flags raised and armies ready to begin the defense and attack they had planned…what they had called new people for, begged for new plans and weapons.

“Go and join the rest with the help in evacuating whose left, I’ll stay here and send messages if anything else happens,” João suggested, hiding his own turmoil by focusing on the writing he had to do.

João would be alone then…something that didn’t sit well with Roderich. Now they needed to be together, to help and aid…

”Roderich!” He turned to see Elisa, ruined and panic in her eyes, “some people won’t leave unless it is by your command. You have to hurry! They believe that you’ll manage everything, and their towns won’t be destroyed!”

Roderich decided on hurrying instead, only being able to send João luck.

“Khaos is right at Spade’s doorsteps!” Louis announced the contents.

“I’m writing the commands to begin and act!” Arthur exasperated, not liking to be reminded.

In this array, in this action and load of continuous working, Elizabeta couldn’t bring herself to go on, heavily bended on her desk, trying to hide her expression of dread. Currently, Kandake was the only one that could grant her comfort, a hand soothing on her back, telling her a mantra to keep breathing.

“All of Clubs is destroyed…everything is gone…” Elizabeta went on to whimper and mourn over the loss of her kingdom, under her reports on how every single province had suffered a darkened poison, all her population left without a home, runaways in other kingdoms she didn’t know could last and the rest…dead…gone, a pain adding and only sinking her more in this position. Others could only stare, not knowing what reach they could make at such a happening…one that would surely befall on them.

Aldrich sighed and turned from all to stare back at the pool…hoping for some new hope from Feliciano’s body, still suspended and drifted…no changes. It had only been a couple of days since they began mourning…they shouldn’t be expecting anything for the coming weeks. Pookie was the only one that sat and took watching next to him, patient and still for his master’s return. Aldrich gripped the latest letter that arrived…not finding it in him to read aloud and worsen the air.

As the Spadian border was spotted and was ready for the onslaught…the Hearts border was preparing itself for the same faith.

Herakles walked the line all the time, one end to the other, sometimes using ferries, even serpents that lived in these waters and offered their help. He wanted to believe it stood powerful, everybody armored, ordered in precision, men and women from different parts of Hearts…even other Kingdoms, ready to face off this monster.

A particular shout made many gasp out of order, for Herakles to see the shake clear in many of their eyes, their grips tightening around their weapons, some making clear sound. Over in the distance, a haze yet still on those hills of Clubs, above it all stood the rage of Destro, the armies there dealing what they could in their battle, the shines of their spell alighting the darkness of this monster. They were all small, like nothing…none of this was working.

Soon…once the monster could take his passage through the mountains, it would cross the sea, blacken it and then it would be a battle of their responsibility. It would touch ground in

Hearts for the first time and begin its ever approach on Berlin.

"Feliciano…Feliciano!" All it took was just the right shout, to make his vision clear again, to halt his breathes enough so they could slowly settle at their usual pace. "Remember… we'll figure something out…we'll find a way…" The boy seemed to lead him back into place, back into his position, into realizing where he was, to the plans…to thinking. Feliciano gave a half smile, turning to the others to nod and make his way elsewhere in the town…somewhere where they could be alone to think…and realize what it was they should do next. They chose a forgotten corner where no one came to bother them, the water reaching at the steps there, Feliciano meeting for that same relax, that sign to head into his mind and let words wander again. It was also a moment to truly let his breaths go back to their usual rhythm…and to try and forget about the scene he just created. He looked back, noticing that the crowds went to focusing on other things, on those who came new here…Feliciano intended to apologize once it was time to leave.

"If he's not here…then, he's not really dead," Timoteo alighted, sure and positive.

Feliciano couldn't join in it…for his mind only repeated that he was gone, out of a reach that they couldn't hold to anymore. "Timoteo, I know you want to help…and I know you want to believe that Ludwig is out there…but it's just-"

"What happened to Romulus?"

It was so sudden that Feliciano took some time to settle on the new question. He thought to all the stories, all the readings, new and old…that letter Ludwig had received from him…that tearful confession on the past field long ago. "Augusta had thought he was gone…"

"But she kept hope didn't she! What was it that she thought that she desperately tried to believe in? The reason she hid her own importance, erased from history all together."

"Because…she thought Romulus's soul was still alive somehow…even if not in the Interludes…and if it was given enough attention it could come back…" Slowly the mechanics in his mind started to turn, started to fall in their place to give it more thought. The letter…the letter. "She was…partially right. Romulus's spirit did survive…it was just… Khaos kept it…he tainted it with darkness and gave it to the Beilschmidt line to pass through…like Augusta was passing through mine…" he stood as it came clearer in his mind like water. "Like Khaos, like me…Ludwig was going to go through his own surge…he was going to…" His mind headed in that darkness, the one he had learned from Ludwig, to understand, to read out the answer, like runes, like monsters, screaming and avenging in nightmares, now in their world come to life. "Khaos…captured him…tainted him…" He paced in anguish as the reality became surer, trying to escape, seeing if perhaps there was something he missed. When there was really nothing else…he suddenly stopped and froze at what it meant. "He was…" he shook, he saw, right before him as if ready to swallow him all. "I know…oh no…I know…"

Timoteo came up and tried to reach him, "what? What is it?"

Feliciano turned, horror in his eyes, “I know what happened to Ludwig…I know where he is.”

Chapter 77

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Timoteo had passed on to the third realm, one evening while they were enjoying from some homemade gelato from Galdi. The angels didn't have to explain anything, with their approach, both just knew. Timoteo tearfully had to say his goodbye, and Feliciano gave him a tightening hug, wishing him the best journey, comfort with the Aces and a good cycle into reincarnation. Timoteo hoped that he could find the four stances, that he could have the universal alignment, save Ludwig and their world.

He was taken into the most darkened path that day…and Feliciano hasn't seen him since. New people came, others continued to leave on, yet Feliciano didn't find another person with who he could share a good connection as he did with Timoteo.

He spent his times lonely, thinking and plotting. In one part, it was thinking words for what the four stances could be. He took to writing them on a hidden wall, carved with the little magic he had allowed himself to use. He had a hundred and fifty written, reading them over and over, trying to find the proper pair to the kingdoms.

In another part, it was wondering how he could get Ludwig back. Yes, he knew where was… but he didn't know how to get him out from there. The only way he could think of…had the chance of destroying him as well.

Then…the point and focus of everything…how was he going to use all of this to defeat Khaos.

He would groan and lay his head in defeat every night, more dejected each time he returned to the Galdi household. He had a corner there to himself, to try and pretend rest, sometimes sketch or wonder on answers. It was also the same place of reunion and planning, always someone there to plan the next event. He didn't mind it, it actually helped to ease him if his mind was in too much turmoil, the speech always enough to lull him to sleep.

For the weeks that passed, that was his routine. This night in particular, he arrived to three ladies chatting joyously over the table. They were too festive, smiling and laughing in a way that Feliciano just couldn't ignore. He let the smiles spread to him too as he tried to peek over, Giulia covering the parchment before Feliciano could read out something definitely.

"What are you doing?" She asked playfully.

"The real question is," here Feliciano took a chair to join them in their sitting, "what are you three doing?"

Giulia sighed as the other two gave approval to let him know. "You do sleep here, so we can't really hide anything well."

“Not to mention you always get loud.”

The other chuckled while Giulia glared. “Very well, your majesty. We are making preparation for this month’s square festival!”

“Already? It’s only been-”

“In a couple of days…it will actually be a month since the last one,” one reminded.

“Only…a couple of days…” Feliciano was startled, silenced into realizing how much time had passed…his time in the second realm almost over. The stress was evident, the girls having to speak on to keep Feliciano from succumbing to it.

“You know…this is a pretty private and very tight group…the island just doesn’t let anybody work on the preparations,” one smug, earning just the right playfulness to arise in Feliciano.

“Really?”

“Yep! Not even…Queens of Hearts or…whatever!”

“You three have been here pretty much the same time as I have. What deeds have you done to be granted such tittles?” Feliciano chuckled.

“Bossiness, surely,” one admitted, Giulia gasping in insult, earning large laughs in the room.

“Feliciano, we’re only messing around. Come, sit with us, I’m sure you’ll have a lot of great ideas to add.”

Feliciano sighed…debating if to indeed give to this while he had a wall he was carving that needed more words…a space that needed more thought…all while a ravaging war was taking apart his world. He shouldn’t indulge…he should be…but this was a chance to be creative, a moment of his past, to do well and grant these people a day of joy…for many their last before they pass on…including his own. He was persuaded for happiness, taking a pen, and looking through the list, adding or adjusting, chatting along with the ladies like the worst turmoil wasn’t happening.

So focused he was…sometimes he would forget to go to the wall, all those thoughts on stressful words vanishing in his excitement for feast. He joyed in these coming days, trying fabrics of heavenly approach, foods of the delicacy of his old world and company of gold. It was like this world had become his, under this spell that made him forget all, dancing and laughing all the excessiveness he couldn’t on those last months of sorrow. And oh what a feast, what playful aura that made him even join the children in running all across the square, being part of that very image of dream that had welcomed him the first time he came here. Many toasted and danced, congratulating Feliciano on his part of the celebration. Truly a pride that reigned him as he ran and skipped all throughout with all the splendor of his people. Nothing could extinguish this, nothing could-

“My sun, my moon, my land, my love…”

The tune disturbed all, the melancholy of a woman reigning strong despite the felicity in this square.

“Wha-what?” Feliciano awoke along with what felt like a strong hit on the head. But in his awakening, he could only focus on where this song was coming from. No one seemed disturbed, they all went along in their enjoyment.

“…the sky has all fallen…”

There it was again, no one heard it, no one reacted, only he startled and searched for anyone in the crowd who could be shouting it.

“…the kingdom weeps their king’s farewell…”

He had to look for it, he had to know where it was coming from, what it was, who it could be. What if they had answers? What if they could say more to the meaning of this song that had haunted him for so long without explanation or story? What if it was Augusta? Romulus? No matter, he settled off, in confusion to the children, halting their game wandering where the Queen was going, deep in the streets of their town, away from this jubilation.

“…and a queen breaks at her lover’s parting again…”

It yet continued to sing seeming to come from every corner, but no matter how quick Feliciano tried to reach it, it was gone, back to trying to reach its distance, ever moving and evasive.

“…but in your defend, all will join and fight for our future…”

Feliciano was growing out of breath, he was frustrating and ready to shout out. “Where are you…where are you?” He ended up whispering to himself as he rounded another empty corner. Nothing yet showed itself, but he knew the coming lines to be the last, to be the end.

“…so the heavens will bless in your rest our perfect peace…”

“No…” and just like that, the melody was gone, as if it was never there, the silence he met at this edge of the island haunting. Feliciano wanted to burst in this miss…what he thought a closeness to an answer…an answer…oh no, the answer! He groaned realizing the wasted time, reminded of a mission that he laid forgotten, forcing his hand unto his eyes to somehow keep the tears that wanted to flood.

How could he just let it all fall? Go on and ignore that his world needed him.

Something, something, there had to be something he could do quick, in whatever time was left, in whatever- someone was coming. Out from the distance…small, no details to be clear yet, a very entrance like the one he had made when he first arrived. He had thought only one…but then he saw a second, a third, a fourth…many…many began to come forward.

“What…” he whispered to no one but himself…trying to make sense, wondering who they could be and what was their meaning. Feliciano walked slightly forward, standing on the waters as they walked toward, Feliciano distinguishing their realm gifted wear, Heartian,

Italian…they were all passing spirits, newly arrived here. There were countless, spreading across like something large had been spilled over, even the sailors and rowers finding difficulty to move between them. They were all lost, wondering, trembling, some held hands, some comforted and felt in that welcoming bliss, others only decided to follow the person who was most ahead, a woman who had been transfixed by the form of the island, her pace quickening the more details she noticed. And then…there was the Heartian Queen, standing singularly, present and still as the majesty of a fresco in a church. That was the pulse that rushed her forward, ignorant to all as she stood before him, trying to believe him there, baffled, stuttering, yet her entire being showcasing questions.

"Sua Maestà," in the end was the only thing she could say, trembling and eyes watered… betrayed.

Feliciano took her hands, comforting and trying to instill the trust she had lost and the welcome he could give. They stood in silence together, for Feliciano had no words, and the ones he had were nothing worth of an apology that she could forgive.

He decided on asking, bracing for the blame, but an answer he needed. "What is going on? Why are so many of you here? What has happened?" Despite so many, Feliciano told them in ease, careful, his hold still as dear as he awaited.

The woman breathed, remembering with pain to then answer: "Destro is in Italy."

Feliciano startled and trembled, a suddenness that could have dropped him to the floor if it wasn't for the hold the woman kept. He was shivered with a cutting pain, as if the reckoning told in those simple words was scratching on his skin.

"What…? No! Last time I was there, he was…he was still in Clubs, only reaching the Heartian border…the defend should have been good…he shouldn't have reached Italy…he shouldn't have-"

"But he has!" She ended up shouting. "Your majesty…you have been gone for more than a month and in that time Destro has swarmed the entire southern Hearts Kingdom. Greece, Iberia, Croatia and Turkey are all gone! Italy was well on its way to join the rest. They're evacuating people to Scandinavia in the hopes it can remain the last stronghold…but it has not been quick enough…" she gazed to all there…those who didn't have time…didn't have the right defend or the soldiers weren't enough. "I know there has been calls to evacuate Germany…for when Italy falls…"

"…he'll be in Germany…he'll reach Berlin…"

"In a matter of days!"

Heavy breathing, a storming realization, turning away to handle these strong words of his world, his home, his kingdom, his cities, dead or on the verge of dying. More the weight of his duty pressed on, blaming, shouting at his incapability of avoiding this. His province, his people, dying, and soon his family and even his body in the castle will be ready to be engulfed in true finality.

All, no matter how far the threat still remained, could feel the rumble, hear the screeches and even smell the smoke that was coming to their reach.

“Everyone out?” Lukas asked who the inhabitants of this beautiful red building had been. Bricks of old, red flowers coating well its gorgeous façade…it hurt to know that soon it will be gone.

“Yes, that’s all,” a man came to take the lantern Lukas offered, one infused with strong protective spells that would cover the group he was granted.

“You may follow the rest. Keep with everyone, stay with a hold on your loved ones and chosen belongings. You will leave the city walking but transport might come to those who are sick and weakened. Keep faith! Scandinavia will be the refuge we need,” Lukas repeated once again…and once again the people only responded with a darkened nod, turning, dejected, looking more like they were walking to an end than actual safety. They began to join with other groups, each shinning with their own red lantern, the only color…everything else just seemed to blacken and grey with the miss of its people leaving, left to the demise of the wrath of a monster.

“All this street is empty,” Tino announced, hurrying to Lukas’s side.

“How is João dealing with the roundabout of Prenzlauer?”

“There’s still three buildings with inhabitants deciding what they should bring with them, even with the insistence. Not to mention they are running out of lanterns.”

“I’ll let Abasi know we need his people to make more. You go and help João. We’ll see what we can do about Mitte afterwards.” And they rushed off between the large masses of movement, with carriages, others crying and refusing, and the bright red lights.

Up from the heights of the castle, Renata and Arthur looked as a plentitude headed off through the northern route, between hills away to the safety they hoped Scandinavia could remain. The red lights alighted them, a shield they hoped was enough to stand and protect them all. They could see only small parts of the city remained and how they hoped they hurried.

There was a far-off blow, a large cloud arising to the sky, mixed with red, flashes of white, and then a shriek that had Arthur and Renata leaning down and covering their ears. From the smoke, they could see but a small image, still vanquishing the outskirts of the city, but the fact that they could now see Destro from the comfort of the castle was provoking and fearing.

“Ready to start formation!” Herakles came hollering, heavy breaths and panic clear. Renata would never get over the new scars of war on him, so much petrified shout in the expression she had met and knew as calm and comforting.

“Then go and start!” Arthur shouted, exasperated, shaking and surely ready to fall apart if it wasn’t for the fact that he was being counted on as a big part of the formation. They all began

to leave, joining Herakles in his hurriedness.

“Has Augustino been taken out of the castle?”

“I’m sorry to inform that he is still here,” Herakles refused to look back, focused on getting them through the halls.

“What? He should already be out of the city!”

“He denies everything. He has shouted, cried, even began hitting some of the caretakers. Right now, he refuses to leave Antonio and Lovino’s side.”

“They can’t accept to leave him here!”

“But they had made their decision.”

“No! Absolutely not!”

“They’re-!” By now Herakles turned to this distant aunt of his, Renata seeing now clearer than ever the reddened veins in his eyes, seeming to pierce at his sight. “-they’re…still hoping Feliciano can come through.” There was a tremor, the castle shaking, some stone cracking and dust falling upon them, but yet they continued this exchange as if nothing, standing and menacing. “Feliciano is supposed to be entering the third realm today and tomorrow we have to awaken him, with or without the power of the alignment. No matter what happens, tomorrow is the decisive point that will tell us if we will all survive or die. No matter what, Antonio and Lovino had come to the decision that they will remain and face whatever happens with their son in their arms…better here than dying somewhere he doesn’t recognize or without his family.” And Herakles was off before Renata gave more to the discussion…to the realization that this was the reality, this was the last resort, the last place.

She gazed down to her hand still glowing pink, now cracking more in age as it was hitting its toll. Oh…how she hoped Feliciano had found something…that he could come be their savior tomorrow at the evening that was planned to arise him.

She couldn’t stand there longer…she had her place in the formation and she had to hurry to it, as everyone around her did.

Soldiers, from all over the kingdom, even others, kept a standing outside the castle, gaze focused and ready to inflict at the first spot of Destro. Many already had their weapons up, some already had magic blazing in their hands and others practiced commands. The interior of the castle was propped with all kinds of defenses, having no other choice but to have offered servants aiding in the guardship and defense. They too, had old weapons pointed, had to practice spells they never thought they would one day use and many of the household leaders were practicing their shouts in harsh war command.

Renata reached the pool, the royals and other chosen servants as well with their own positioning and weapons.

The last stance, the last wall before Feliciano, still suspended in the water, the body beginning to look cold, colors vanishing.

“Renata, you stay at the very back with your family!” Wang Yao shouted, all moving aside to give her place. It was with her husband, her son, his husband, and her little Augustino, well cradled in all their holds, scared, trembling and crying, but despite this, despite the bruises, the scars, the traumas, the three older men kept their own tightening on their weapons, knowing that if they were to go, they were to go with a try in fight. Renata found her place in the huddle, holding them all dear as if they were to say goodbye now.

“Remember to keep faith still! We have a day! We have to believe Feliciano can come tomorrow with exactly what we need!” Kandake reminded to all in a chant, yet coated in fear as they moved back, as if Destro was in the very castle finding his way between to reach right to them. It seemed like it was the actuality with this new shake the ground took. Yet no messenger came as it was meant to be planned. They still had a chance to keep their ground, together and strong.

The stances… the stances… he had to know the stances now! What if he wrote all the words somehow? What if he brought them with him? Maybe he could convince…something or someone in the third or fourth realm. Perhaps reading them all aloud, shouting, tearing, crying…it was when he noticed he was heaving and shaking to this new group that came.

“Sua Maestà,” one tried to reach and comfort.

“I have to…I have to…” his mind still went on in a reverie, stuck in the need and desperation. It was with the touch of this nearing man that he was made aware of his standing and who stood by him.

No…despite everything he had to help these people, he had to get them settled. If there was something he could do, if he was abled, he could push through, he could go on with his duty even at the worst heaviness.

“Please, all of you, follow me. You are now in a safe place. There is currently a feast that I’m sure all would love for your part in it. Come, come with me!” He hurried, keeping himself kind and offering, one all could follow, fall finally into the ease and beauty of this place, more so as they traversed these enchanting alleys, reaching the alight of the square and what it was offering. It could have been a joy, could have been the welcome that all there knew they had to give to all the new that came…but then after one, came two, came four, came six, that alley Feliciano came from bursting with a large array of people that easily soured and planted worry in all. Nevertheless, many came to offer their welcome, but also to ask, to fret, the square in the end turning to a place of worry and agitations.

“Feliciano, what’s going on?” Giulia came, demanding and shocked.

“Destro was in Italy.”

“What?!” She already settled in the hysteria of all, some who heard in the surrounding joining her as well in the disarray.

Feliciano shushed and tried to soothe her to even breathing, “we can’t let ourselves panic now. Focus on helping others calm, answer their questions to the best of your ability and help them settle like is the norm!”

She managed to find her peace, nodding, and already settling on what she considered the command of a queen. It was enough now to keep everything at bay, all distracted in the conversation to really notice how Feliciano was slowly moving away. He had some time, he had some peace and loneliness, he could head that instant, memorize all the words, find a way to write, find a way, find a way- what was supposed to be his leap was cut by the large presence of an angel.

“Oh! You’re here! Good! These people need a lot of help to settle. Please, more angels must come and-”

“I’m not here for them.”

Feliciano dropped.

“You shouldn’t worry, my brethren will come to do their part, but my own…is to take you to the next step. Please…come with me.”

And like this his time was cut short…he was to say goodbye, he was supposed to go to the last steps of this process and yet he felt empty, incapable to face the reserve, still with questions and wonderings on how exactly he could obtain this. For a moment he wondered on fighting. He still possessed power, he was an Ace, Augusta’s chosen, he could… he stared to the potence of this angel, tall, shinning, armored and with a spear that could well stand at any fight. These angels were chosen to keep well a balance in death that Feliciano knew, by nature, he had to head to…as his grandmother created. With a nod, trying to calm whatever anguishes boiled in him, he decided to follow.

As all others, Feliciano was brought to one of the many alleys, moving on and on in its depths like this was but any other stroll he had taken to think of words for stances. The angel at one point moved behind him, and Feliciano, still confused by where he should go, settled on only moving forward unless the angel spoke a word. On and on everything moved around him, but no difference, no portal, no transport to the next realm.

“The third realm is only a hall, shaped by the magic that lays between all worlds. Once there, you should focus on only moving ahead, no matter what occurs around you.”

“What…what happens?” Feliciano thought he could ask.

“You transform. You take an image granted by the Aces, for what is to be your spirit and soul in the heavens. It is granted in attacks that might seem like they are to hurt you, but they are indeed only changing you. Do not worry, no matter how harsh or intimidating it seems, it is not meant to cause any harm.” Silence befell, still the same walls and canal at his side. “Your

only there a matter of minutes, alone, and on your own you find the entrance into the fourth realm."

"How long am I there then?"

"It is different for everybody. In your case, I assume not long, perhaps only a day or even a couple of hours. If you are meant to return to the living world…you can't pass the gates to the heavens. If you do, the connection to your body is severed and you can never return."

The street began to get as grim as the words, Feliciano shivering.

The angel's step suddenly halted, Feliciano's own stopping in question. The angel then pointed to the canal, which began to ripple and produce an image downward. It darkened, away from the aquamarine waters Feliciano had gotten to know in his stay. It was a tunnel, under the water with a pathway that Feliciano didn't know if he could walk upon. The angel motioned for him to step forward, commanding and defending so he wouldn't try any escape. Feliciano was obedient, nodding and beginning a hesitant step into the canal, his feet sinking into the water, but not as deep as shown.

The ground came to him like a ramp, leading him deeper into this darkened tunnel that slowly enveloped him unto the next stage.

Chapter End Notes

I am full of shook to write the next chapter.

Chapter 78

The street disappeared behind him, he couldn't see the angel or the delightful sky any longer, all faded until it mended to this new surrounding of marbled walls and strengthening pillars. As expected, he was alone, leveling until he gave a landing step that echoed rather ominously in this emptiness.

He was fully in the third realm, no trace of the second seen in any of these walls, this floor, the ceiling, the directions that went on in darkness.

Focus on moving ahead, the angel had said, and so, if even the uneasiness, he decided to tip toe his first foot forward, slow and testing, his body trying to follow with in the same hesitance and worry. He thought he could land his foot with nothing to worry about, but it was just as he did that there was a sudden glow, a gold tracing intricate designs all over the marble and pillars. This hall seemed like it had begun to breathe, brightening in these beautiful signs all around that despite the words of the angel, it instantly invoked panic. Feliciano burst with sudden energy to run, away from whatever was to occur. Unbeknownst to him, whatever was occurring, took a grasp of his feet, brightening in this beautiful gold that began to decorate with golden chains that hanged and flourished, raising up trying to completely engulf him all. Feliciano refused it, trying to shake it away, jumping awkwardly forward as he did. In that turn, a sudden light was shot at him, a rather rash push that almost tumbled him forward to a ground gloriously alight in reds and golds now. His whole body was now coated in a gold and red that completely eradicated the colors he had kept from his very entrance into the realms. He shone an outward that added to the lights of this hall, now no trace of the marble he had entered to.

When he thought he was safe, away from whatever this could throw at him, he was suddenly bombarded with many more lights, shakes and new designs growing on the walls, stronger at each step Feliciano made to run away. He only continued to shine brighter, these new lights wrapping around him to make outward red marks, like flowers on pillars and walls, or stars above his village. From what he wore in the third realm, it began to elongate, giving him a long cape, other parts tightened and extended to cover him all in a suit that reminded Feliciano of imperial majesty, sewing symbols and forms with richness of rubies and gold. It decorated him in jewels, in coloring his face, up and up until he felt the weight of growth on the top of his head. It was a halo, large, with surely pillars that elaborated in detailed art, extended to always keep him heavenly and ruling. His eyes were now the red of wine, his hair the flame of fire, opening and flowing in an accept to all this magic that fell on him, his walk more peaceful, practically floating as he made his away across. The residue that was flown away in sparks and light, went upward, sculpting a set of white feathered wings, tall, expanding. Feliciano felt them suffocated in these walls. They should be free, they should be flying over a land his to rule as he pleased.

He felt a grace of power, so definite that he already wanted to decree, shout and sing it all until everything was formed as he desired. Begone with this hall! He was ready to destroy it all, but he was still being granted image, power still reigning on him, his being joining the

lighting of this hall, now much more until he could feel in it belonging and safety, like he was simply strolling one of the halls of his castle.

He skipped, he danced, he welcomed himself in this form, one that had never made him feel so beautiful.

Something was coming… he felt a sort of precipice…one he knew he had to accept in and take its passage. It was the entrance into the fourth realm, the hall ending in a beautiful, tall, decorated in flowers, vases, statues and gold, door. Pure darkness awaited at the other side, but Feliciano felt unafraid of it, in fact, he smiled as he dared to go through, like another splash, an exhale of new air, all behind him without a care. With the growth of his wings, he expected them to carry on through, but as his breath came back in…he realized that he was falling, into a void, nothing to fly or even hold on to. He screamed and was torn in worrying over falling endlessly or hitting a hard ground. He surprised himself with the control he kept on his wings. He couldn't make them fly, but he could make them wrap around himself as he witnessed a familiar blue light coming, to keep him cushioned for what he thought would be a harsh hit against water.

He did fall against something…hard, yet soothing, bouncing across these waters in ease before it decided to keep an even float, slow and content. The wings seemed to have fallen on their own, opening Feliciano's gaze to a still continuing darkness overhead. Below him was polished wood, red, a triangular forward that Feliciano identified part of a boat. Once he settled his breath, he stood in what he realized was a small space, his wings much larger than it, having to stand up to not take any more area that Feliciano used to pace as he explored how this vessel was decorated. Of course, red, golden trimmed, flowers and medallions towering and flooding to two pillars that stood at the bottom of the vessel, they met at an arch with a beautifully decorated St. Mark at the top, kind, watching and expecting.

Once he was familiar with where he stood, he looked overboard, to the same waters that continued in the darkness that he had met back in the first realm. He reached a hand and noticed that this time it could sink in, wet and translucent as water should be. There were no other boats as his…well, no other people, floating above releasing magic, or walking or flying. Nothing. He was the only presence.

"Hello," he called in the hopes someone could come. He repeated, he tried in all the languages he knew, but nothing came back to him. He sighed, then noticing a tremor from the corner of his eyes. It was the boat hitting against the water, sailing a path…it was moving! It was the realization that it was passing him on, to the rest of the heavens that all awaited when passing all the realms.

This was the last realm…he only had a couple of hours, maybe even minutes, to get access to the Eternal Reserve and yet he still didn't have the right approach, the right key. He startled himself up and began a harsh pace around the boat. He had to hurry! The desperation making him sweat and lose the ease of his breath.

"Okay, okay, okay, what can you use? What do you have?" He told himself as his mind swam, as his steps turned into stomps that were a wonder it didn't tip the boat over.

The reserve needed to recognize him, to know him and accept him. His answers to this was standing tall, showing his full body, heart radiating, gathering voice to shout: “Support!” It echoed, it rang…but nothing came to answer. “Uh…the moon!” Still no answer. “Economy! Ruling!” He began to swing as if it could help his words carry on longer. “Cultivation! Pleasure! The Sun! Management!” He turned, he shivered, the words shivering along with him. “Unity! Own! Reservation! Improvement! Force! Oppose! Commerce! Intention!” With each word shouted, with each silence, his voice dwindled, the force on his chest gone, the wings, the glow, the marks, this imperial new suit, beginning to look like a ridiculous costume instead of the power he felt only minutes ago. He trembled…more than ever he felt dead as this darkness seemed to swallow him more, the loneliness draining him, the boat beginning to look like a haze as tears dwelled in his eyes.

“Offering…equality…magic…ability…” whispers now, losing intensity and the strength to stand. “Representation…planification…prediction…cooperation…” he slowly came down, taking a kneel, his face meeting ground as the shiver shook him to a high whimper. “…affinity…relation…” his tone cracked, it chocked and scratched at whatever word that tried to escape. “…harshness…history…”

What was the point? He harshly spat at himself with venom. None of the words he surely tried to memorize would work. And like this! A tearful mess, weak, alone, broken and given up, leaving at a lost his entire world…he was not worthy to show himself…prove he was whatever these words were. He felt himself tempted to sink into the darkness below him, forgotten and never to arise, let everything fall as he surely will, as everything was meant to crumble and die. Aloud went his shouts, his pain, reflected well on these waters, Feliciano already imagining all the bodies that were meant to pass here, disappointed, with horror and betrayal in their faces.

These realms seemed like a great escape from the horrors…but he did not know how far these two monsters could go…these realms were just at risk…the heavens…it will cease because of his doing, and he coated the boat in the tears in his fault.

It was time to give up, to face the ending that was to come and he did so with what started a calming breath…but then it trembled to misery, pain and shouts again.

“And what, Signorino, are you doing here?”

Feliciano arose and stilled at the warmth of this tone, embracing, welcoming…Feliciano already smiled, even with reddened eyes, a continuing shake, but he turned to meet the sudden shinning presence of his grandfather. “Nonno?”

He stood in his own boat, a gondola, a lazy lean on the pole he held, as courageous, powerful and bright as ever, more intensified with this armor of gold with beautiful symbols, his own pair of wings, a tall halo, his eyes and hair the fire and gold he himself took. “I was hoping one day to see you again here…but it is still too soon.”

“Nonno?” Feliciano was hesitant, for a moment wondering if it was a hallucination, a trick of the realm.

“Ah! Chi se ne frega! Come over here and hug your old man!” It was undeniably him, Feliciano could feel his embrace from afar no matter where and how.

“Nonno!” He shouted sure, running, letting the boat move as harshly as it wanted. Right now all he cared were those arms around him, that warmth, that cuddle and love that was so uniquely his grandfather’s. He couldn’t help these new tears that coated his shoulders, how he shook and gave himself into it. Augusto laughed and smiled loudly as he usually did, those last days of his life a faraway past that it was almost like it had never happened. They swayed, Feliciano began to grow his own laugh, letting them both settle into a safety that made them wonder if it could stand against whatever force the universe threw at them.

It could, they knew it could, Feliciano had never felt so sure of something in his time here.

As they were accustomed, as a normal train of thought returned, as the anxieties held above Feliciano once again came crashing unto him, he rose and moved back…while still keeping a tight hold of his grandfather’s hands, refusing any departure. “Nonno…what are you doing here?”

“Can’t I visit my living grandson from the beyond?” Augusto pouted so comically Feliciano couldn’t help the chuckle.

“You’re supposed to be in the heavens, nonno!” Feliciano scolded with a deep smile.

“So what? I can do whatever I want anyways. The Aces can’t do shit!” He was sure, high and mighty as ever even as he spoke of the gods. “You won’t believe how they treat the Valenti over there! It’s like were Aces ourselves! They bow and join our feasts! We ask something and they give it to us without question! Your great grandfather Frederico holds balls every day and won’t stop talking about how he’ll be reborn as a prince, and your great grandmother Giovanna has created palaces for all that cannot compare to anything you’ve seen in your world!”

“Nonno, that sounds wonderful!” Feliciano’s eyes alighted and grew in wonder.

“It’s overbearing! Sometimes I can’t stand it!” Feliciano’s laughter swayed his boat slightly. “Sometimes I like to take this job to get away from it all, helping those who are here to pass on to the heavens, talk and know…whatever I can about you and the rest of my family.” And sincere he turned, deep and loving, Feliciano letting his hand caress his now marked and glittered cheek. “And you are looking absolutely beautiful,” Augusto complimented sweetly, Feliciano cuddling more into that hand. For a moment he had forgotten about how he was decorated, his wings a reminder that soured him once again, Augusto feeling him sink in his arms.

“You knew I was in the realms?”

“A young Queen of Hearts in the realms is bound to cause a stir. At first, I thought the worst. I suffered and begged it all to be a mere rumor. But more came with the news…then more cleared your reason and how this is a journey in which you are trying to find something…that you’re really meant to come back.” Augusto didn’t think he could see his grandson sink

lower, even as he still held to him. “Amore…what is happening?” He tried to raise him, to at least meet him with his eyes, even when such misery lay in them.

“I…failed, Nonno…” and the tears came again, his lean to hide and not show any disgrace to his grandfather.

“What? Why? Why are you saying that?” Augusto continued to keep him up, shaking him if he had to.

“There’s war raging in our world. Khaos and Destro are obliterating everything and whatever we do, it’s never enough! I spent weeks mourning over…mourning over…” the pain wouldn’t let him continue.

“Ludwig?” Augusto guessed as much.

Feliciano could only respond with a nod, as his voice was too hoarse to do so now. “You… you heard?”

“I did. I was hurt immensely when I found out.”

“Did you…did you ever see him pass through…?” once again he dared, even if it was like more needles to his pain.

“I’m afraid not…no matter how long I waited and expected him…he never did.” Augusto didn’t dare utter more of what he wondered it meant. It was sorrow that was best not to let themselves sink further in.

Feliciano couldn’t really always escape it, his loss was always painted clear on him, one Augusto wished he could wash away…but he knew what it was like, for he had gone through the lost of his dear Helena. Now, she was with him, they had a home in the heavens together, and Augusto still cried himself to sleep in her arms, not believing he had truly been reunited with her. He now wondered how he could have possibly lived in the old world after her death. Yet, he had this…he had the chance to meet with his wife again, even hope for a future where they could reincarnate together…Feliciano…as it stood…would not. He would never connect to this pain…and it hurt that all he could do was this caress, this presence to assure him that he was not alone even in this infinite darkness.

“I…I came here to see if I could access the Eternal Reserve. There the power of the alignment is stored. I could have brought it back and…saved everybody…but…but…” he began to shake with tears again.

“The…Eternal Reserve?” Augusto questioned, just as he noticed a wooden raft pass them, a marked man stood there, proud as he omitted beautiful spheres of fire. He sailed pass them, not taking notice, following the fastest current.

“To access it, I must prove myself…but…I’m not worthy enough for it…it won’t come to me…I came here for nothing.” Feliciano didn’t bother to notice as a large canoe passed, rowed by several, all laughing loudly as they hurried.

“How do you prove yourself to this?”

Feliciano didn’t raise his voice as a raft flew above them, people there in a jitter that Augusto had to lean closer to hear his grandson’s answer. “The four stances.”

“The Four stances?”

“Yes, the four stances, Nonno. I’m supposed to know them, what each kingdom represents and I have to show those qualities myself.” There came larger metal ones, with sails enough to cover them, ignorant to all. People sang and shouted, but neither had the felicity to join.

“The four stances…just the four stances…”

“Yes, Nonno. I don’t know them, and it’s so complicated and I can’t- Agh!” Augusto hit him with his pole.

“The four stances! I taught you this! I explicitly remember teaching it to you several times back when we started our teachings in the villa!” He was angry, groaning and huffing.

“What?! No you didn’t, I don’t remember that!” Another hit of the pole, Feliciano groaning and trying to rub this new pain out from his head.

“Well if you didn’t spend half the time doodling and distracted thinking about…prancing naked in red fields with Ludwig, then right now you wouldn’t have this dilemma!” Augusto had to stand so his shouts could land right on him.

“Wait…so you know them!" Feliciano realized before he could defend himself from the new hit.

“Of course I know them! And so do you!” He pointed harshly.

“Nonno, I really don’t remember them and I am in a huge hurry. Just tell them to me and then we’ll have a chance to save everyone!” A sailboat passed them, an old Viking one, with Jokers shouting as they made their way.

“No!” Feliciano was expecting a new hit, but Augusto instead brought the pole to his chest.

“What?! Come on, Nonno! You can’t just leave me like this!”

“I won’t be leaving you, amore mio. I am sure you know them. Even if sometimes your head was in other places, I know you kept the words, I know you have lived and proved them well, you just have to name them.” He was confident, to the point that as a large shine came in their backs, as the currents came faster, as more boats, rushing animals and whatever transport that Kingdoms have concocted with passed by them in beautiful shines, he was patient and knowing.

“Nonno, please, just-”

“No. You must name them on your own. Feliciano, think! Think back to the days of our teachings. The four stances are what each kingdom represents…and who represents the

kingdoms?"

"The…King, Queen and Jack."

"Exactly. Now, how is it mostly shown?"

Feliciano lay in silence as he thought, focused and determined, Augusto knew, even as a boat made of ice sailed past them, a whole array of people skating and dancing in it, and Feliciano was still in his own mind.

"Through their unions..."

Augusto thought he had to keep leading him, but Feliciano must have touched something in his mind, must have come just to the right reminder, laid forgotten in memories of sitting on those stuffy desks back in his home, for he himself continued, "it's shown in what their union takes strength on, how they present themselves to their kingdom, what gives it energy and how even the King and Queen decide their relationship on."

And it was clear, in memories of his beloved Ludwig, of his dear Kiku, their coronation, their wedding and sacrifices. Their childhood ran past his mind, just as he saw two children souls, two Heartian girls, in the back of a St. Lion sprinting forward. He thought to their grown reunion…not the best… it was hurt, it was broken…but it was fixed, they fought and mended for it as every King and Queen of hearts has done, until it grew unto deep feelings of… "Love."

Augusto smiled.

"Hearts's stance is Love."

There was a sudden glow, pumping like the beat of a heart, alighting these oceans in red before dimming in beautiful marks that sparkled and glorified more this passage to the others. A man in a coach laughed and let his hand play with some of the red sparks that arose.

"Good, go on. What about Diamond?"

And Feliciano thought on Francis' years, like a guided brother. Vash and Lili were so young…but this gap was always present in Diamond royals, for their purpose was to grow, mentor and learn between one another to always be sure of what would be the best outcome.

"Diamond's stance is Wisdom."

A yellow beat, to mix along with the red, gardeners taking from this energy to make flowers to add to their already plentiful rafts.

Then he thought of Spades, a population mixed with so much magic and technology. Differences, tensions…it doesn't help that the King and Queen are to be married without knowing each other until the year of arising. Yet they always manage to work, to unite, and above all… "Trust. Spades's stance is Trust." Then came that distinct blue to add, pattering stars all across. Some took baskets to take, others stared and tried to catch what they could with the simple palm of their hands.

“One more, carino,” Augusto reminded with a teasing smile.

Just Clubs…Clubs…only one more.

The shakes were turning stronger…some had reported that parts of the castle had crumbled. Despite the hours that passed, many still stood in the same exact spot they had decided as their last face off. Their weapons were still brandished and some even had magic running in their hands.

“Destro has officially entered the perimeters of the city!” One soldier came crashing in to announce before he settled off to help the next waves of attacks. A roar could be heard clearly, Augustino began to cry from it, and to add, the tremors they knew now were from attacks blown straight to their city.

“How much time is left?” Kandake shouted to Renata, who shook as she gazed to her hand and then to the greying body in the water. “I can’t be sure…perhaps thirty minutes?”

“We might have to get him out sooner,” Elizabeta realized.

“Can we send him some sort of message to hurry?” Kiku wondered, moving back to join the Valenti family, to help in the necessary.

“The music box!” Renata turned to Lovino.

“I’m not sure, but we can try!” Lovino took it out and without a moment to wonder, he opened the chest to bring the melody.

Clubs was the biggest of the four kingdoms, with the most intimidating and mysterious of rulers. They kept the field that held Khaos, their mountains and trees a stronghold that guarded and was ready to face whatever threats. Like Diamonds, the royals were not expected to marry…they were expected to show… “Power.” To match along with the force of their kingdom. “Clubs’s stance is Power.” And the ocean was joined by the pulse of green. A row boat that had been trying to be quick, to keep up with all these movements, couldn’t hold their stop, their play and wonder as all arose and crafted.

“Love. Trust. Wisdom. Power.” Feliciano enunciated them sure, this darkness now blessed with the four kingdom colors, colors that began to shine well on him from their reflection. He smiled, letting it spread on his body, feeling powerful again, hopeful, ready.

Under the paint of these currents, something began to glow, to call. He was about ready to jump and answer it, but not before turning to his grandfather, with his very same smile, prideful and ecstatic for a sure future to come. Feliciano ran once again into his arms, a sure last embrace, warmth and belonging that Feliciano hoped could last until they were to meet again at his right time.

“Most beautiful Queen the kingdom has ever had I always said.”

“Ah, Nonno,” Feliciano rolled his eyes, but he accepted the words.

“Little Augustino is the loveliest thing.”

“How did you-”

“I have my ways,” he chuckled, tightening more his body to him, hoping it could well imprint. “Watch over him, watch over your family, your kingdom, your world…save it…and make it ready for your own little ones.” Augusto rubbed the red jewels in his palms, knowing…how, Feliciano didn’t really care, he smiled and bowed in promise.

This moment was interrupted by a melody…a highly familiar one that seemed to crack across this world.

“I’ll journey and see beyond the lines of our kingdom,
Never a fear to be lost, never a fear to fall,
In pleasure, I will take the mysteries of what I could meet,
If you accept to be mine, my Queen.”

It wasn’t sung, but Feliciano could feel the words already pouring from his heart, coming to life in his head. No one else seemed to listen, the boats continued on by him, in their own music, Augusto himself unware of this alarm that rung. He only continued to smile, behind him the largeness of the gates of heaven, immense, sculpted, living, beautiful…tempting even to Feliciano with a light that began to coat everything.

“No heat, no cold, will stop me of my search,
No sun, no rain to go against my strength,
Just promise me your hand,
And love me in our eternity.”

This song was stronger, what was below the waters joined in it with insistence to come and so Feliciano took one last breath, before he had to turn away from his grandfather, another goodbye, but indeed there was a promise he had to fulfill.

He extended his arms in farewell to the realms, before he brought them forward to propel him, a jump, a slight flight and he was crashing into the surface, into the depths as heavy and moving as water should be. He helped this pull by swimming in it, deeper and deeper until the lights above weren’t clear, until the call from down below began to shine on its own, apart…in its world away from all.

In a quick distraction, he could see the shocks and releases of the first realm, the bright colors of the second realm, the lighting halls of the third realm and the rushing waters of the fourth. He saw them all like webs around a grand network, and the call, coming from a center…in a unique place between the connections of all the realms. It took its form like a cabinet, rich, crafted and opening its door of elegance to the person it had found worthy.

“My sun, my moon, my land, my love,
I know it’s a journey you will overcome,

But I don’t need you to go so far,
I want you here to kiss me.”

The melody still went on, hurrying Feliciano’s paddle across this expanse, the light reaching more, engulfing his approach. It widened as it felt him there, growing enough so it could take Feliciano into a center, truly in depth with all the information, all that was available, showcasing not in form, but in various feelings of power, going through him until he could recognize the true one he needed. He let that specific one take rest in him, mend with his skin, his blood, his spirit, his inner most power until he was well blended with it and…awake.

Chapter 79

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Now!" Arthur shouted.

Renata quickly ceased the glow in her hand, gone like the flicker of a candle.

"Now somebody go get-" Louis was interrupted by a sudden blast, white and rampaging across the room. They quickly thought it an attack from Destro that had managed straight at their location, but they didn't hurt…the light became one of warmth, of familiarity. They actually heard Augustino laughing. The light was gone swiftly, everyone began to stand from their fall, just in time to see Feliciano arise, taking a large deep breath, to then cough as he held to the stairs of the pool. The first one to come to his side was Kiku, one hand to help him stand on the dry stone of the room, the other comforting on his back. They all rushed to circle him, but Kiku held a hand to give Feliciano some decency of space, to breathe back in actual living oxygen into his physical body…alive again after a month.

In all honesty…Feliciano looked horrible. He was hunched as he leaned to breathe again, wet, dripping water to the ground, his clothes haggard and his body was only slowly recovering back its color. He still leaned on Kiku, who still offered to give him support.

This was not how they expected him to return. If he was like this…it only meant… "You… couldn't get it…couldn't you?" Roderich guessed, deflated, all joining in this accept of what was soon to be a world ending failure. They believed it more so when Feliciano hanged his head lower, refusing to look at them.

They sighed, some began to tear and whimper, given up, kneeling to the floor ready to have everything destroyed before them. But whatever wallowing that wanted to continue, was broken with a sudden red glow, cracking and even drawing upon Feliciano's fallen hand. Feliciano chuckled, beginning to stand, carefully moving Kiku to the side. All water on him left, dried, looking pristine even if he was bare footed and still wore a simple blouse and pants. His hair and skin shone brighter, with deeper colors and from him came this stronghold of magic, decorating the room in a sense that alighted them, shone them forward to be coated in this new air.

"I got more than just the alignment," he assured as he opened and showed them his eyes covered completely in magic, bright, powerful, but yet still they held the childish wonder of Feliciano, assuring them it was deeply him. "Much…much more." He opened his hands to let his arms begin to get decorated in shines of gold and red, letting the room tremble and grow with a garden of magic, of sparks and lights that fascinated all to a stupor. He let it all stop with a simple sway of his hands lowering, his eyes closing to then alight again with his usual amber. Before all could word and celebrate, smiling and shinning deeply with hope, another crash came into the room from a messenger, tired, huffing and ready to fall to the ground.

“Destro is in the midst of the city! He’s approaching the castle and we are not enough to hold him! You must come and help us!”

“Perfect! We have Feliciano with us and he holds the alignment,” Yao announced, as all brandished their weapons and magic again. Only but Feliciano startled and questioned as his gaze was frantic.

“We’ll help him however necessary. We will attack this instant and make sure Destro is dead by the-"

“Wait! Wait! Wait!” Feliciano interrupted his father, standing before all as a blockade.

“Feliciano, we have to act now!” Lovino shouted.

“I know, I know! Just please…don’t kill him…”

They all widened and stood perplexed, for not just the words but the feel in his tone.

“What do you mean not kill him? He has helped destroy a large part of Clubs and is the culprit for having the entire southern Hearts kingdom obliterated. If he comes any closer he’ll have us all killed instead!” Aldrich shouted.

Even if all the energy currently rested inside him, Feliciano hurt, holding back tears as he shook and tried to control them to stay inside. “Let me deal with this! You can help me all you want when we have to defeat Khaos…but leave Destro to me.” With the words he managed his calm and straightening, a stronghold that actually got the rest to fall and stand back, lessening the hold of their weapons and even the energy of their magic.

Feliciano sighed, calm…then potence as he turned to the messenger still trying to calm his breaths. “Tell everyone to fall back…and to come straight to the castle. One brigade is commanded to keep a Titanium shine spell so Destro can attack until everyone is safely secured inside. Once done, I myself will place a protective shield to keep the castle safe. I assure you all no harm will come.”

“And then you’re going to face Destro alone?” Lili was dreading.

Another shook that caused pieces to fall in the room, a roar that made them all shutter.

“Yes. I will.” Decreed strongly in his voice, one everyone knew they could not go against, having to nod and accept, if even shaking with worry. “I will only put up the shield once everyone is in…and you have to promise you will stay inside.” He turned with strength in his foots, one that made all bow to in reverence and accept. “Only then will I head out and face him.”

“Your majesty…what are you doing now?” Elizabeta dared herself to ask.

“I will watch and make sure that my commands are fulfilled…and I have to look for my harp.” And with a surprising calm he took to the halls to head to its storage.

The call was done quickly. Feliciano saw from his heights as messengers spread and began to lead way back to the castle. Some rushed alone, others needed assistance because of their wounds, depending on the help of other soldiers to make way, but they made haste. Whoever was left in the city made approach to the castle, all behind a line of wizards that kept the Titanium Shine as the Queen had told. The spell was but a hallucination, a tall pillar of strong grey magic that feigned the energy of a living person, a perfect distraction for Destro, who attacked it as viciously as he had done everything, the ricochets deadly to the city, tearing and coating in smoke of destruction. Entire streets were there no longer, others blackened, Destro's mere presence calling poison to reign even in the skies, tempting to rain with burn.

This was the first time Feliciano's eyes fell on Destro, the expanse of darkness, raging and swinging with its own arms and face, with runes of red and white, shaped with strengths that were actually wider than Khaos. He had yet to see Khaos in his alignment, but already Destro proved much more evil than the depictions he had seen long ago in the cave of artifacts.

He gulped, he gripped harder the column of the harp he had now…trying to contain his fear…to see…

The ground shook, awaking Feliciano from his thoughts, to realizing that the wizards and the last of the soldiers were entering the front gardens of the castle. It was his time to leave…to face…to begin and end this all. He actually…believed. He had confidence, one that made him stand prideful, with a deep breath that was only for the beginning of a melody.

"I'll journey and see beyond the lines of our kingdom,
Never a fear to be lost, never a fear to fall,
In pleasure, I will take the mysteries of what I could meet,
If you accept to be mine, my Queen."

He sung it underneath his breath, tranquil and peaceful despite this disarray.

In the eternal reserve, there was indeed much more than just the alignment, more than just power and magic. There was information, knowledge and instructions about everything, even notes of power left behind. One of those messages was the ability to actually change the harp. No…he would not dare change the design, structure and color Augusta had placed, for it was sufficiently beautiful. All he needed was to change its size, something small he could carry in his palm, to easily begin his descend down the castle, like a singular entity that existed out of everything, merely trying to make a passing.

"No heat, no cold, will stop me of my search,
No sun, no rain to go against my strength,
Just promise me your hand,
And love me in our eternity."

This music he tried to make his own sound, away from the shouts, the hurry of everyone trying to make their place in the castle for the shield.

"My sun, my moon, my land, my love,
I know it's a journey you will overcome,

But I don't need you to go so far,
I want you here to kiss me."

He entered the place of action, of all running and creating a panic that Feliciano felt suspended in as he made his way across. He paid no mind to them, he left them to their disorder. No one really came into silence until they noticed him…easy, like he was just strolling through the castle trying to find a pleasant breeze.

"Would you want all the gold I will find for you?
Would you like the songs I will bring from afar for you?
Would you accept me as your shield?
And would you want me always by your side?"

He sang on, making that image more the one that all thought Feliciano was really going through. They all stood as they witnessed him, letting a rare peace fall on these halls.

"What is he doing?" One soldier asked.

"Isn't he supposed to be facing Destro?"

"They said he was going to do it alone!"

"But he's just singing!"

The whispers continued.

"I don't want any of the riches you will bring,
I don't care for any of the songs,
I only want you to hold,
I only want your arms around me."

The voices would always fall, beginning to just accept…and trust whatever it was that the Heartian Queen will do.

It was his own silent parade down the rest of the halls, down every stair he needed to take, reaching ground, the main door of the castle now appearing before him. The commotion was the strongest here, filled, with people in shouted pain and tears, healers coming to act quick, screams and hurry to head in from the royals at the front.

"Bring me your love, your kisses, your loyalty,
Your passion, your hope, your defeat,
Your promise, your weakness, your strength,
I will keep it all in my heart."

"The casters are almost here!" Kandake shouted, shock panic in her expression.

"And where in the hell is Feliciano?" Vash shouted, just as he was met with a surprising silence, noticing how all gazed back to the very figure he questioned, making his way singularly down the hall.

“Let the doors open wider…let the last of them come in,” Lili reminded, strong and pushing so all could fulfill despite this rare glow Feliciano shone in, distracting and even beautiful.

“I’ll journey and see beyond the lines of our kingdom,
Never a fear to be lost, never a fear to fall,
In pleasure, I will take the mysteries of what I could meet,
If you accept to be mine, my King.”

Nobody dared question the song…they just gave the necessary space for Feliciano to take, in that moment handing everything to him. He now had their lives and future, hanging in his hands and power.

The last of the soldiers made entrance to the castle, the casters were now right before them, still holding to the spell, turning to the royals awaiting the next command.

“Stop the enchantment. Head inside. I’ll deal with him.”

They nodded, albeit fearful still as they turned their hands to release the hold. They rushed inside, leaving the pillar as it was, able to withstand a couple of more whiplashes from the remaining energy.

There was still some time.

While all shook at the image of Destro so near the castle, Feliciano stood stable, unaffected and with a calm some were envious the Queen could keep. The royals kept a guard around him, watching and waiting for any action. Only Pookie broke this as he took landing on Feliciano’s shoulder as usual, cuddling and comforting no matter the turmoil. It was almost like the monster before them wasn’t there at all.

“If you are waiting for me to change my mind, I am not.”

“To be honest, do whatever you want…just get rid of that thing,” Arthur admitted, his fear shown in the slight shake in his tone, as well as the fierceness he gave that made this a command.

Vincenzo glared, but it eased as he placed a hand on his son’s shoulder, “we’ll be here, ready to serve you for anything. Defeat this menace…but stay safe.”

Feliciano smiled, the enchanting one that spread and made them all shine on this eve of darkness. “As I’ve said before…stay in the castle. Leave everything to me.” And with that he took a step out of the threshold, beginning his way, the others not daring to close the door, for it was their watch to the spectacle they knew would mark them all forever. Many others took watch from any of the windows, frozen and expecting.

In that chest of power, not only had Feliciano found information, but he found the forgotten lyrics to a song Augusta had long ago created, a hymn to the misery of losing her beloved.

“My sun, my moon, my land, my love…” he had begun to sing again. It was louder this time, echoing to the point that all in the castle could hear it…they even wondered if it spread to the

whole city, since Destro suddenly stopped, a widened expression in his eyes that was eerily human.

“The sky has all fallen…” he continued, but he didn’t go on without a sudden deep breath, alighting in beautiful marks, ruby red. Once all that energy he needed was gathered, as he released his breath, large red lights began to grow from different corners of the city. He didn’t have to twirl his hand or utter some incantation…he walked on down the main courtyard, a simple thought in charge of letting these lights glow the streets they were located on, rushing forward until they reached the center of the castle. From the base it created at its edges, a net like structure began to grow, beginning a covering sphere of the castle, slow as Feliciano was still kept at its circulated area.

“The kingdom weeps their king’s farewell…” he managed to sing on as he found himself ever reaching the official gates, only a matter of steps now.

“And a queen breaks at her lover’s parting again…”

To his surprise…Destro remained awfully still…as if he was enjoying from the song… perhaps trying to find its location…or trying to find his target.

“But in your defend, all will join and fight for our future…”

The shield continued its upward current, to the amazement of all who stayed inside the castle, distracted in its form enough that they didn’t see as Feliciano finally placed a foot outside of the perimeters. With his exit, the shield met at the top and finished. The castle was now well protected…nothing would be capable of destroying it…and even at the worst it will still stand. Feliciano could now keep his focus on only Destro.

“…so the heavens will bless in your rest our perfect peace,” he finished the song, elongating an indeed rare silence in the city. To the surprise of those back in the castle, Destro didn’t lunge forward and Feliciano didn’t attack…they were easy in this stillness. They both continue to breathe out, nervous, like two strangers worried over their first meeting.

Somehow…even for this, Feliciano had a song, new and his…with thoughts for Ludwig and a willingness to do anything…absolutely anything for him.

“My sun, my moon, my land, my love…” he then began a slow reach, a walk forward, brave and with a shining happiness from his expression to his steps, eager, each new approach lighting the more, extinguishing more the fear.

“My king who shines above all,” he smiled, such joy that already teared at his eyes.

Destro continued this stillness, awed and wondered, frozen yet in his spot.

“Darkened, lost and taken…” and Feliciano finally took that weakness to use, beginning a spell that lighted up the entire city, glowing in gold as he used it for an intense heat, one that surely burnt and brought Destro back to screeching and sending swings, destroying streets and buildings…and yet Feliciano stood in their fault, smiling and unaware.

“I know your heart is stronger.”

Now the song was an add to this poison. Destro wanted rid of it, so he trampled forward meaning to fulfill his kill as intended.

Raging, monstrous, Feliciano still looking so diminutive in his shadow, and yet the Queen continued to smile and only move forward, in a want to meet him.

Many in the castle had to shield their eyes, some began to weep and others shook as if Destro’s was above them ready for taking. It could very well happen if he just swallowed Feliciano…which seemed would be very likely the case.

“Your light is brighter…” And Feliciano dared halt, much to the anguish of the castle, slowly, painfully slow, raising a hand…not the one that had the harp. From there, he gathered light…warming and loving…comfortable and even…happy. Despite how diminutive it was, right in the middle of this darkening blaze, looking like it could easily drown between all…Destro stood just as Feliciano, both not daring any harm to the other.

“You are ruler, you are king…” and they saw then that the song was dedication…dedication to Destro. The gaze their eyes shared was of childhood friends…turned to lovers…to then the King and Queen of Hearts. Destro let himself sit, the viciousness of his killing hands, turning gentle, forming fingers…familiar fingers that reached only for a simple touch. There was no fire, no magic, when Feliciano reached for its touch, he didn’t hurt, in fact, his smile was only larger, letting his hand caress the large hand of darkness like any regular skin. He embraced it, he even cradled it, letting himself lay on it, already feeling him entirely. He gazed up, with hint of tears from the peak of this happiness, to those large eyes that now more than ever reflected his beloved.

“I know it’s you…Ludwig…” he couldn’t keep the last words in the tune of the song, for it was more important that he knew he was there, more important that they had this reunion, a reminder that at the worst…they would triumph.

Destro…Ludwig…accepted this welcome, letting himself lean in blissful rest and comfort, careful as he lay right over the tiny figure of his husband. How he could, Feliciano raised his arms and embraced him, even as his face was formed this monstrous, loyal in giving him his ever devoting love, caressing and mending and how he wished he could kiss him. It was difficult, but…he tried, his lips reaching to any corner of a mouth he could reach, and with it, he began the full intent of his spell, one that went on its own course as he instead focus on feeling the powerful emotion of having his husband's lips again.

“Is he…is he kissing that thing?” Vash couldn’t help but mention. The rest were too dumbfounded to response, only watching as the city began to glow more in the scene of this kiss.

Despite how it was all gold, it seemed like color was brought back to the city, enveloping everything, slowly tearing apart every inch of darkness from this evil vessel. No more storms, no more poison, instead there was healing, coating everything in flowers, in new jewels to the buildings, in a brightening that made the damaged parts of the city new again. Destro turned smaller, smaller, every part of him slashed to nothing, disintegrating instead in shine and stars

that made this grey day shinning with the colors of a beautiful morning. Piece by piece this vicious monster began to be chipped away until only this body remained…a human body. The golden light it was developed in was too much to really notice any features, but there was no hesitation in the way Feliciano desperately held to it, letting it rest on him, coming to kneel down until it could lay on his lap comfortably.

Knowing it was safe, the shield on the castle fell, in a blink, and in that instant the castle doors slammed open with the insistence of the royals. Feliciano didn't care for this commotion, he simply let his hands trail on the figure's hair, their blond strands coming back, their silk and softness, the hardened head, the strong jaw, nose and cheeks. His skin turned its rightful pale, his body as perfectly as Feliciano always considered it, left with only tattered remains of surely the last armor he had fought with. The brightness began to dwindle, leaving a wondrous heat in the city that made them swear a melody continued to sing. With the last twinkling of gold gone, there was a sudden grasp of air, of steady breathing…along with a heartbeat.

Ludwig remained in this rest, letting his body slowly get used to skin, to breathing in and out his control, testing with sudden grips and shakes that indeed…he was his own again. He baptized that aware with a fluttering of his eyes, that beautiful blue that the very sky seemed to have granted him. He saw a shining day, he felt the warmth of great summers and then he saw…his own angel, his sun, his love and queen and already he smiled. It caused a slight pang…but it didn't matter…it was just the right reminder he was back…this was real… Feliciano was there.

"Ludwig?" Feliciano still questioned it, still wondering if this was the plethora of all dreams and he was still stuck in one of the realms.

Ludwig groaned and still found it hard to move for now…but it would pass, he would heal… and he will live. This time he could show a grin that reflected the light of this new sun on him, making it more real for Feliciano, who began to tighten the hold he kept on his body, whose eyes began to water, but even so his own grin wanted to keep expanding.

"Feliciano…" he managed to speak, rusted and sore, "…do you…remember that spell I used to do as a kid after my power activation…the one I had to do-" "-two for each afternoon hour," they repeated together in a perfect sync that made them chuckle.

"And do you remember…how it was you that always convinced me to do it when I complained about it…and you always…tried to heal or calm whenever I got burnt afterwards…"

"Yes…yes, yes I remember that dearly." Tears fell, but even with this shake, Feliciano went on smiling.

"I feel like…something just like that happened now…I couldn't…control my power…I couldn't…I couldn't…." Ludwig found it hard to speak when he was shaking with the same tears that took him, the emotion piling. "-do anything…I left myself turn into a monster and destroy everything I hold dear, but you …you brought me back…you stopped this…you saved me…"

“Oh, but Ludwig, despite all this darkness, you managed to see me between and let the spell heal…you let yourself be freed. It wasn’t me alone. Oh, how I missed you and how I love you, I love you dearly and I just…I just had to save you. These last few weeks…without you were awful. I was so lost…everything was darker and hopeless…I was so ready to give up and join you wherever you were but…there’s a world looking up to us, there are tons of other millions we have to save and…” he raised his arms to the jewels were their children lay. Ludwig managed slight reaches to be able to caress them, smiling, the joy letting him raise from his lay a slight more. “…we have our own kids to show the very world we live in.” The jewels had gotten brighter, new red vines began to grow around Feliciano’s wrists and Ludwig was sure to touch every line, proving to his children that he was there…that he will be there. Their gazes met and they knew for sure all was real, their touch was theirs, their breath running and every fiber of magic in them was glowing now for their return. It exploded as they reached forward for their kiss, deepening and passionate, letting themselves in that fuel, letting whatever tears come down and fall for once in comfort and trust in the new flourished land below them. They settled between on one another in whimpers, in a hold all around them that was tight and placed, nothing, nothing…not even the approach of all, shouting, crying and celebrating was enough to depart them.

Chapter End Notes

There’s so much that went wrong while writing this. To me, this chapter should have meant more, but in the end…I don’t know…it doesn’t feel like I wanted it to. I tried what I could of fixing it but after noticing I haven’t gotten any comments or words for this story in months…yes including the last amount of chapters…I should just…no care about this as most people do. So many times the last few weeks I’ve thought about stopping…but, NEWS, there’s only about three chapters left to finish the story, and after five years with this…I think I should give it the chance to at least let it be done. I told myself many times, I created this adventure for myself and anyone else who reads is just welcomed to come along on the ride. I really don’t like coming here all guilt trippy like this, but just…been through a lot the last few weeks, thinking a lot about usage of time…and sometimes I wondered why continue with a story that I only care about, wasting time? But then, exactly, I care about it, I adore it, I don’t need the lack of interest of strangers. It is great, I love it, and it is taking swell time. For those who have stuck and the very few who are the pushes that keep me going with this hideous mammoth. Thank you, and thus, I bring you a chapter in what I could of messy holiday shenanigans.

As I said, savor it…only three more to go.

Also, was this part really like the one in Moana? Yes, I know. I had this idea long before the movie came out, but sadly I was slower. The movie did give me the idea to add a song though~

Chapter 80

Chapter Notes

> Yes, yes, yes! I know, it's extremely late! But you have to understand that I am going through A HELL LOT right now. I am working on an important qualification here in Berlin, so basically studying, plus working, plus German classes, and my school will force me into a volunteer program soon…so that's more time out from writing. None the less, it does not mean that I will abandon any projects, just know that it could take some time. I wrote this chapter in three different locations since I was moving a lot these last few months :'D Another reason why it took so long. As always, all I ask for is patience, updates will come, I am determined to finish this, especially when we are so close!
>
> But oh boy…chapter 80…sometimes I never thought this story would get so far…but here it is! Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

All Ludwig needed was a simple day of resting and healing. Afterwards, he was heading out of his ward, tall, strong, fixing his hair and buttoning his jacket as the regular business of the day. Feliciano hadn't stopped crying, constantly asking those around to remind him again that he was indeed…alive. He waited before the room, ready for the embrace that came, tight and loving as the one they had shared before the castle when Ludwig turned back. They would have stayed in this bliss forever, if it wasn't for an annoyed cough and the applaud and giddiness of a child. Yet in their sway, they turned to spot Lovino, who shone with a gracious smile despite, the very one Augustino alighted the hall with as he was held at the hip.

"Reminder that there is still another 900 meter tall monster rampaging across Spades, soon to make entrance into Diamonds and well…we should be doing something about that." He spoke the words with such normality as if he was talking about what he had for breakfast that morning.

"Where are we to meet?"

"The usual place, doofuses," rolling his eyes and moving away. Augustino waved and the couple smiled at him as promise that they would follow.

They departed, but keeping yet a hold of their hands as they now met a hurried pace with the rest of those who quickened in the halls with the continuing business.

"All right, were back at this. What has happened?" Ludwig asked with the serious intent he wanted to stay dedicated to despite where he just came from.

Truly like he had never been gone.

Feliciano couldn't help the sudden smile, the tightening of his hold, before he had to breathe it all out and bring forward the seriousness this matter still meant. "The Club kingdom is utterly destroyed, as well as much of the Southern Hearts and Spades kingdom. Khaos took the west to the Spades kingdom, while Destro went on to the east to the Hearts kingdom." Feliciano was determined to keep this entity separate from Ludwig. "Many of the refugees are here in Hearts under our protection or in Diamonds under their crown."

"What are we to do about the lost territories?"

"I have a plan that I prefer to discuss in the meeting with everybody."

"Where is Khaos now and what is he doing?"

"The last messengers arrived this morning saying that Alfred is preparing himself to defend his capital. Arthur and Yao might leave to join depending on what we decide to do now."

"And what are we deciding now?" Ludwig asked just as they arrived before the current meeting room.

"They're waiting on us for that," Feliciano said just as he pushed upon the doors to make their entrance. And to Ludwig's big wonder, they all stood with brightening smile like stars, glimmering more with whistles and applauses, many with grins that Feliciano hadn't seen in a while. Ludwig blushed and held ever tighter to Feliciano, showing a prideful smile that told Feliciano enough about how he was there and how it made him more than joyful.

"Enough of this! We have to act immediately!" Louis shouted, forcing guards to push the King and Queen in and slam the doors behind them, a sort of alarm that brought them back to the stage of it all.

"I'll be honest…I never thought I would one day say this, but, Ludwig, Feliciano, we move at your command. What do we do?" Roderich stood, ready and surely with calls to initialize the use of his power.

Many in the room already adorned armors and shined with weapons, ready to head out that instant to act on a battle they believed now was truly for victory. And Feliciano thought it perfect and with a shared glance to Ludwig, he knew it was the same sentiment.

Feliciano took a deep breath, taking and leaving his hold with Ludwig's hand to place them on the table, the simple gesture commanding and confident. Ludwig was rather startled at seeing it, but he was more than content, letting his husband take it all as he wished, trusting and knowing that all the power was in his hands.

"We are taking everything back. Elizabeta, Arthur, Lili!" All three turned simultaneously. "You are heading back to your kingdoms and you are going to restore everything."

"Excuse me?" Elizabeta questioned, almost insulted.

"I don't think you've read the recent reports, but they're poisoned lands with nothing we can do to change it," Arthur cleared with hurt.

“But we can change it!” Feliciano determined, a height in his voice that seemed like it had echoed all across the castle. He stood up yet again, starting simply with a breath, a meet in his magic to reach, to call. He glowed with marks, powerful and all felt inclined to bow. Yet they didn’t, frozen by the wonder.

Feliciano didn’t begin to glow in red, to their surprise, he glowed in green, completely taking him until a different voice called from his mouth. “Elizabeta Héderváry and Roderich Edelstein.” Potent and god-like. Both the Queen and Jack trembled at such a force. “My chosen. Come forward and you shall receive my blessing.”

This was not Feliciano…and Elizabeta and Roderich shook as they moved forward. Despite, they felt a great presence in this being, a refresh in their body that alighted and cleaned them of all kind of turmoil that had inhabited them for months. The closer they came, the more at ease they felt, with bravery to stand straight and unafraid before whoever currently took Feliciano’s body. Feliciano raised his palms to them, Roderich and Elizabeta knew by instinct to show their own palms, feeling a spike in their magic unlike anything. Not even the magic they felt in their crowning ceremony felt like this.

They were given a new source of energy, an unthinkable power that was not at all of their world…but had created it. It was then that the voice seemed to introduce itself with the power, making clear its name as all was left in their hands. With it, they were given knowledge of its use, like it had been a part of them from always.

When Feliciano moved back, they exhaled, at peace, smiling, the couple exchanging glances with enough understanding that was ready to act that instant. They gazed back to any Clubian soldiers in the room, and with a silent command, the soldiers knew to mobilize, all the Clubians in the room marching off, leaving the other inhabitants of the meeting lost and perplexed.

Feliciano reverted back to normal, lights dimming and standing with only his usual childish smile like he had been exchanging some innocent secret of youth. Ludwig still did not understand what was going on, but joined in that smile, still believing and trusting. But quickly he alighted again, this time in blue, a new voice, this of a woman, a call to Arthur and Yao that had them following as they had seen the Clubian royals. And there, as they went through their own exchange, did they understand their mission, the plan and how the future looked brighter. Like Roderich and Elizabeta, they nodded with a glance and all the Spadians left. Lili and Vash took their same responsibility as Feliciano alighted in yellow, taking their action like the rest with a simple leave.

Those who were left in the meeting room were yet dumbfounded.

“Uh…excuse me, but…what do we do?” Kiku brought to question.

“The same as everyone else. First, we heal our kingdoms, we rid of the poison, we bring our people back to their homes and to their normal lives, to their crops, their art, their families, their everyday lives that kept peace. We gather our surviving soldiers and at my command, we head and face Khaos.”

Simple, straightforward and leaving everyone without a dare to question further.

“Amore…how exactly do we do that?” Renata still found it unthinkable, to bring back their lands as they were before.

“Don’t worry. Remember, I have the hand of creation…also Nonna is going to help us,” with a comforting smile that twisted then to a powerful grin, with a sway and jump that was just… not Feliciano. His eyes turned to a crimson red, the purest form of their kingdom color, presenting clear who it was that spoke now.

“Nice to see you back, Ludwig dearie.” A woman’s voice, with a care that was familiar and belonging. Ludwig bowed, knowing who he was addressing and knowing well to show his respects. But she was gone in just the same twist, having Feliciano back to lead.

“Follow me, we act now.”

They were all out of the room that instant.

As commanded, they all took their trip to the poisoned lands of their respective kingdom. All had blackened, anything that once stood grounded down to the floor in a stench that wanted to rip at the pristine silks and metals of the royals’ dresses. Ellizabeta walked these lands with a head held up high, as if it was the garden it had been before. She was barefooted…but they shined in protection, everything under not giving her a cut or a bruise. The soldiers behind her were aghast, yet they dared to follow behind in wonder, their own armors shinning beautifully under whatever shine Elizabeta and Roderich gave them.

Elizabeta stopped to breathe it all…and she smiled, peace in her expression even as they stood before the most deteriorated her kingdom had been. To make things more confusing to the soldiers, Roderich took her side with the same ease, grasping her hand and smiling at her with bright confidence. They both gazed forward, closing their eyes and they began to glow in a rare transparency of colors, not green as they had expected.

Something expulsed from them as they breathed, the light around them spread, slow, gentile, but living and rapid. The soldiers grew in wonder as they saw that ground that the light reflected began to rumble with life, purifying the dirt and letting actual brown healthy earth appear. Such mundanity made some of them already laugh. But the excitement did not stop there , for in that earth, little sprouts of green, with small leaves, began to grow in an impressive rapidness, coating more and more until the land under them was as green as it was before.

To the soldiers, who had thought all their land lost without a way of returning, it was worth of celebration, some shouting, whistling or jumping. It was the perseverance that made Elizabeta and Roderich’s smiles grow wider. They shared a wink, which already made an agree, and so they breathed in much more, letting that light grow and grow, more of their nation green appearing in their land, bringing with them trees, stone…perhaps a twist of new that Roderich and Elizabeta created from their inner creativity.

A new flower, a new route, a new curve to old streams.

In Diamonds, Lili stood at the long shores of her kingdom. The sea had darkened, coating the shores in its misery, away from the beautiful golden it had kept for so long. Sure, her kingdom had not been destroyed as the others, but the royals knew well to fix and protect what they could.

She had been instructed…by Jabbar…Ace of Diamonds. She felt him still in the power that flowed in her blood, still teaching and lecturing every move, how each point of energy was supposed to be flowed and how to release it all to the image he made in her mind. Yes…she would create it, she would call for it.

She wrapped her arms around herself, with her breath, the winds around her became stronger, the waves began to pulse along with her heart and she opened her eyes. Like a breath, she could control how they moved, how they shone, beginning to give them back, slowly, their natural blue.

In Spades, Yao could finally get the ground to still, to stop the shakes it had taken, letting the crumble finally halt. Arthur stopped the storms, for the first time bringing this part of the kingdom the natural light of sun.

It was done simple, as easily as a snap or a step.

Arthur and Yao had put their hands upon the ground and in their spread, they brought back the deep blues of the tiles that had been there. One by one they came back, growing just like the dirt, the flowers and grass that laid between them, up to the trees, the houses that had been there, even whole mountains began to wake back to color. Yao intensified that spread, wanting to cover the whole valley. Arthur aided him, adding to the push that could extend to all the crevices, to every single wall, well and plaza that had made it once splendor.

None of the royals could only keep it to their place. They had to move, spread, fly in the process if they had to. Elizabeta swinging through thicket of vines, with each pull bringing back ancient large trees that covered well beneath them in green life. Lili skipped by the shores as she brought back its gold, adding shells and shine that made it all the more pristine. Arthur enjoyed shooting from the tall perks of mountains, running it all like an orchestra under his command. Feliciano, created music, he brought all the canvases he had ever made to life with the brush of his hand, mind and even his dancing steps as it stabled the ground, bringing back their famous pillars, architecture, sun kissed homes, their vines, their abundance of fruit and the colors that made Feliciano's smile grow the more in its everlasting sunshine.

It was starting to look just like home again.

Ivan at one point had shed tears of relief, kneeling down to the ground to embrace the ground, with the greens he had never known he would have missed so much. Francis could

now intensify the kingdom's defense, a beautiful diamond wall shinning well, keeping the peace and life behind him. He let himself tower tall, like he himself was a shield that would be impenetrable to whatever Khaos would throw. Khaos wouldn't stand a chance anymore, Francis smirked to himself. Alfred, atop one of the kingdom army dragons, actually cried as he began to lead people back to their homes. Many shouted in celebration, but others still paced with panic, those especially that currently still ran away from the threat of Khaos still in their lands, but now they actually seek refuge in their own kingdom, by a powerful king, queen and jack that healed their home with surely the help of Aces. It was just a miracle how the power, the control, seemed to move the very ground to their bidding.

Many families returned to their homes to find it standing just the way they had left it. Many wept, finding it hard to believe that everything was there…back.

And Ludwig, Ludwig rode on confidently on the back of a St. Mark, staring up to his husband, his beautiful, cheerful and powerful, daring, incredible husband, as he himself called upon vines and trees to arise from the ground, taller or just in their same glory with nothing to make different.

Finally, finally, Feliciano had let the harp free, letting it take its large length, only to play, from the melody, whole new colors coming, bringing back a symphony of red that all sang along with. The air arose with freshness that all wanted to doze with, lay in its rest, confident that they would be safe. Feliciano heard as laughter, cheers, celebration, joined this new music he made, and he would smile down to Ludwig, glad for the shine in his blue eyes and just the hope and restoration in the views between them.

Now this…was a world they could proudly show their children one day.

But as the royals of the four kingdoms completed their healing, they met at a point where the darkness was at its strongest, where a fury continued to rage and roars still echoed across all their near distances.

Khaos was still alive, still destroying, and they had all met where it was time to face him… and end him.

They had taken camp, proudly the flags and shields of all four kingdoms shinning together in the small rotunda where they all watched as he ravaged on in his inferno. All the soldiers that were in charge of holding him for now had been evacuated, only a powerful shield, with the help of all four kings, over Khaos's sky as he slashed and scream without a single consciousness of intelligence. They wondered if he had seen how they led the remaining soldiers away, if he knew how powerful they were, how they have healed the world behind him, that Ludwig was back and Feliciano possessed the power of the alignment along with so much more.

His immense figure didn't seem so powerful anymore. Kiku raised his hands and could squash him between the pinching of his fingers.

As if it was as simple as that, Feliciano couldn't help the chuckle.

“What’s our strategy now?” Elizabeta asked with serious intent, a large and heavy sword in her hands that was utterly eager to begin cuts and slashes.

Feliciano sighed, in that deep breath bringing with him seriousness, shinning so much more mature than any had expected. There was a new amber in his eyes that made him so much older and braver, almost exactly like the images they had been taught to believe of Romulus.

“We take each a direction, you know what you have that is powerful, use it, at all the forces you can call on, weakling him, acting before any throw he can give. Now, whatever he attacks us with, is nothing.”

Another screech that had them all turning, yet they listened on. For once, with Khaos acting his vengeance behind them, they were not afraid.

“Diamonds, North, Spades, West, Clubs, South and Hearts, East. You have already been granted protection from the alignment power I will use. Do not be weary of it. No matter what happens, I won’t let anything happen to any of you.” Sure and a decree that was high. Feliciano didn’t have to say it for the rest to already know it.

Pookie, who had taken his large form, stood ready by Feliciano, with a stance that instantly reminded Feliciano on the grand images they made of his great grandparents riding these very creatures. He petted him lovingly, trying to see, to believe that he could make his own images worthy of being painted on the ceiling of churches.

“So…do we just start?” Vash was suddenly hesitant, after that show of strength, he started to shake.

“Scared?” Roderich teased even as he himself began to tremble, all slowly noticing it as well.

“I thought we were done with that,” Yao scolded.

“I’ve seen everything fail, everything crash down right before we believed, we had hoped and thought we could make a change… what if this is but another of that?” Vash went on.

The silence he brought made all explore these very words, a falling to them away from the power of gods they currently possessed.

“I…I fear the same things,” Ivan…the tallest and biggest of all, the one who they had though would smile his vengeance as he bloodied Khaos…trembled and kept a heavy grip on his staff.

“We haven’t even begun,” Ludwig tried to make them realize.

“The most important battle is yet to take place,” Lili joined her cousin.

“What will make this one stand out?” Alfred wondered.

“It will be the last,” Francis assured.

“I’m tired of having lasts,” Arthur complained.

“Francis is right though,” Feliciano interrupted, mighty and high to get them all to stop, to leave a silence to listen. “It will be the last…” he was sure this time, taking steps forward, all parting to give him a space they felt was too heavenly to touch. “Hear me…” he called out… not just to the royals, but all, absolutely all that were there. “…Hear me…hear me all this very instant!” He commanded with a piercing anger that left some trembling by Feliciano instead. “It is not only Kings, Queens and Jacks that stand here today! Look behind you!” He spread his arms to the still surving armies under them. “You have the entire might of all four kingdoms here! And do you want them to see this…scared and disgraceful leaders with nothing but the armors they created? No!” Shouted like he had been insulted. “No! They see what all our kingdoms represent. Power, Wisdom, Trust…and love…” Feliciano took this opportunity to gaze to all, their attention well taken, the words being well planted. “They will see what these very stances give, power granted and given by the Aces! They will see us fight, they will see us bring Khaos to his knees and then for sure our world will see that we are not a force to be fooled with!” Feliciano saw as the ground seemed to be raised under them, just with the strong belief in their eyes, standing tall to surely meet the fiery eyes of Khaos.

“The Aces have chosen us…we are the ones destined to make this battle, to make this war… and here, as it will be written about us…will we end this all.” With intent to kill, to finish. There was now no more space to doubt, to hold it, they all stood ready for that very finish. “My Clubians…My Spadians…My Diamonds…My Heartians…remember…we do this for glory.”

A sudden shrill, and yet no one flinched.

Some raised their weapons high.

“For honor,” Ludwig was relaxed, but just as potent as his husband.

“For riches!” Abasi shouted high somewhere in the crowd, getting many to join in his shout.

“For the gods!” Antonio bellowed from the perch of his animal, with him hundreds to join in flight.

“Yes…this…this is it,” Francis raised, along with the magnitude of this crowd that made him feel like the earth of the entire world was to trample over their foe now.

“The Aces are here! They are at our side!” Roderich knew as he joined in the array around him.

“For Clubs!” All the greens shouted as they made their movement to take their south, their colors and flags high.

“For Spades!” Arthur and Yao led to their west.

“Let’s bring this motherfucker down!” Alfred just had to add as he joined the flight with the dragons of their infantry.

“For Diamonds!” Lili, raising a hand full of bright and dangerous magic. To the surprise of many, she was the one that gave that loud shout that pushed the forces of her kingdom to the north.

Ludwig, Feliciano and Kiku stood yet, wondered like children over all the action that decorated even the skies. Khaos’s darkness was nothing compared to the festiveness of their colors as it began to tear about the void. Even so small, the Heartian royals felt taller than everything.

“For Hearts?” Kiku raised magic, Ludwig raised his sword, looking both to Feliciano for his own decree.

Feliciano breathed in and when his breath escaped, he turned with glowing marks, a golden halo coronated him, wings released, eyes a deep red, power beginning to ooze from him, and his two companions smiled as if they had always knew this as him.

“For Hearts!” And he raised the harp, growing large to the desired length and comfort of a bow, Pookie leaning ready for his seating and thus Feliciano took that perch, motioning for Kiku and Ludwig to join him as well. To Pookie, especially in this form, their weigh was nothing. He just as easily sprinted high, to join the rest of the force that created the population of both the earth and sky.

Feliciano lead them in their direction to the east, coming close to Khaos, who stood in his place surely wondering over all these pests that suddenly came, surrounding him well.

“Kiku…” Feliciano reminded and the jack of Hearts knew. He bowed in promise and suddenly took a jump out of the flying lion, landing elegantly on the perch of a red glass he created. He extended his arms full of magic, raining it down in a cleansing shower that began to deteriorate the swinging arms and pillars of darkness. Many Heartians came to his aid in intensifying it.

In each direction, the Jacks did the same, riding much of these dangerous arms that could make this more difficult. Before, just riding of one was a feat that had already killed many of their people. But now…many were rid in easy seconds, people glowing in happiness as there direction was clearer. Those in the ground could run or gallop on their animals free and without a single threat above them. Now, as these dark ribbons weakened, it was much easier to rid with the ease of their weapons or even their fists.

“Ludwig…” Feliciano called his husband’s attention back, who had been starring at their already beginning success proud.

Despite the wings, the halo, this new glow of marks, ethereal in gold truly like the grace of an Ace, Ludwig looked on to him like his adoring Feliciano, the friend he had since childhood and now his husband who was expectant to bring their first pair of children.

Ludwig nodded, although hesitant as he gathered slight bits of darkness from his power. It was the one thing that had ruined all, but Feliciano had gathered information from the eternal reserve that could help. Now, Ludwig was to test it for the first time. They had no time and place to practice. Yet Feliciano believed and Ludwig…didn’t feel it control him, overtake

him. It was his free to do as he pleased. Yes…he could do this. He smiled and made his preparation to do his own jump, but not before leaning towards Feliciano and the Queen of Hearts let himself a freeing of his hands to take Ludwig to his embrace. Their lips came for one deep kiss, one magical and igniting. Ludwig felt himself lift from it, a power that helped him fall and take just the right aim even as he fell midair. He had it locked, just as the other King and Queens did their own. In a powerful slash, all their attacks met and crashed upon the shield that Khaos had been using the entire war. They had never known he had one, but now it was no matter, for they easily took it down. Khaos surely felt it for he stilled and looked upon himself as if he had been exposed. He was, clear, and already Feliciano knew the aim and where he needed to land it.

“Take me there,” he told Pookie, and the St. Mark nodded and hurried in his flight, a swirl all around the great beast that granted Feliciano the best view to watch all the horror. He smiled to know how much less darkness there was, spotting the natural blues and greens underneath that was beauty of Spades. Suddenly he felt a burning, intense even with his own Ace protection. In his distraction, he hadn’t noticed how Khaos came right to his presence, his monstrous eyes and mouth a pool that with ease he could fall into. Feliciano wouldn’t dare, and at Khaos’s sudden roar, he didn’t even flinch, he only sent him his own wrath with his stare, before pulling on Pookie’s large mane and flying them away from the throws Khaos tried to swing at Feliciano. He made his slides, with the help of the wind he called, Pookie’s speed and just how small they were, easy to find crevices to make their escape.

As Feliciano reached a good top with a good position, he raised his arms high, his fingertips glowing in light, in power that called and brought from all around as it met and Feliciano let it all rain at Khaos. He screeched horribly in pain, meteors and stars coming continuous. Khaos tried to smash some away, some successful in being thrown at Feliciano’s direction, but Pookie and him, went under or around them well.

That’s when Feliciano began to worry over his St. Mark, already parts of his fur burning from the attacks. “Pookie, let me deal with this now,” he told him and of course the animal refused. Feliciano sighed, expecting this kind of loyalty, but then it gave him an idea, knowing he could trust it. “Go get Ludwig! Bring him to me!” Pookie understood and flew in that direction, Feliciano letting himself fall in a backward flip, a graceful one that let him play momentarily with the wind, the float, the freedom, before his wings caught them and lifted him up. He copied what he had seen Pookie do, the action coming easy, naturally like it had always been a part of him. He couldn’t help his grin as he went forward with his route, charging something powerful in his hands, growing in an intricate and beautiful symbol that alighted with him well. Khaos saw it that instant and went quick for his aim. He bounced against it, the symbol Feliciano made growing at just his size, with a sharpness and cling that resonated across the whole land. His immense figure fell, and the soldiers underneath feared the worst, but Feliciano spread a shield above them, quick as he made his flight. He had to be quicker as Khaos tried to stand again, not caring over the people he would step on as he raised.

Feliciano continued with the lightning shields, intricate and beautiful, but this time Khaos was strong enough to stand against each shock, despite his roars of pain, intensifying as surely the stings got stronger. Feliciano abandoned the shield tactic and began to swing them as disks. Sometimes they were excellent and worked well to burn and tear apart at the target,

other times, Khaos still swung on and Feliciano had to tactically avoid, under, over, breathing heavily as he quickened and forced to deal with the speed. For the first time, he took the harp, he prepared four arrows from the gold of his magic, powerful and with ease. He aimed and fired, the piercing one of deep lightning that alighted the sky like part of a storm. Some soldiers had to be moved away for caution as Feliciano intensified, as he kicked on with earthquakes in his force, fired arrows that made this storm bigger, called wind, power and light that exploded in burns that some couldn't even look at, having to ground and stop whatever they have been doing.

To their success, more of Khaos broke, with crumbles and pieces literally falling, revealing a weak white that some could easily use to bring more damage.

Khaos was heaving, leaning, having to hold to the ground to give himself some stability.

"He's weakening!" Gilbert shouted, his tone and call one that could extend across the plain, some celebrating to it, but it made Khaos huff, a smoke coming out that poisoned once again. He used it to give him leverage, having to heave more and more until his weakening figure could hide in its grey. Feliciano was succumbed under it as well, but with his power, it was nothing. It didn't sicken him or blinded him, but he couldn't see all that well in this dusk. He could still keep his flight as he tried to strengthen his vision.

"Feliciano!" Came the call of his husband, his armor teared, cuts and his hair a mess, but to Feliciano he shined beautifully and with perfection. He dared to stand on Pookie as the St. Mark brought them close together. Ludwig showed hurry and preparation, a leaning towards him that didn't care over the precipice under him.

"What do I have to do?" He already offered and Feliciano knew that whatever it was, he would fulfill instantaneous.

"I need you with me." He offered his hands and Ludwig took them and let himself fall into his float, hold and security of staying midair in the midst of this blinding smoke.

Pookie followed behind as Feliciano rushed them trying to find any sign of the main body. "The blackness works like another shield. It also must be what helps him to get power. All we have to do now is finish getting rid of it and not give him the chance to regenerate. Once it's crumbled, I can give a finishing blow that will end it all."

They had a clear ending spoken, possible and sure. Ludwig nodded between all, finding no hardness even as the monster moved and awakened again, roaring and trying to swing at them between the now dimming smoke.

"Any ideas as to how exactly were going to do that?"

"With your help. With the dark magic inside you."

Ludwig sighed but found it indeed the best idea.

"We have to get close."

“All for you, liebe.” And there was no fear as they plunged closer, enough that they could touch or even walk upon, for it was slowly losing its burn and hurt. Feliciano had to let Ludwig go, using force and power to run across the body while Feliciano continued his flight, sending slashes, ribbons and symbols intense enough to crack. Ludwig gripped hard upon the body, identifying, taking and putting himself into the magic to disrupt, to break apart with ease. Khaos, noticing Ludwig’s presence, tried to once again tame him, spreading through his veins in darkness, but Ludwig learned well to fight against it, using his exercises from childhood to push back, ever stronger, with burn and shocking pain that had Khaos reverting back, disgusted and without any intention to try again. Ludwig smiled to himself when he noticed, finding himself the winner in this specific battle. His grin only grew larger when no matter how he dug, how he broke apart pieces of black with mere force, Khaos did nothing, only dealt with whatever state this caused as his main target became Feliciano.

As Ludwig plunged his own darkness into Khaos, even at the top reaches Feliciano flew upon, he could feel his magic working, tapping, using it and adding it to his own purpose. He enlarged the harp and placed one of its ends against the body. He changed it to the fierceness of a knife and let it carve aggravatingly as he flew on. Khaos roared and swung his arms and his whole body to try and rid of him as if he was a mere fly. Whatever reaches, Feliciano managed, even as he continued to move the harp across, cracking and disturbing. He would swing back with whatever part of him wasn’t focusing on flight or holding to the harp, with splashes like waves that extended across the valley in a beautiful gold that reigned to the rest of the soldiers in a wonderment that somehow took away horror from this. Or other times, in a large impress from the tiny figure Feliciano still presented himself as, he would punch with power, a force that shook the earth and pushed Khaos away in a tremble that some thought would blow up the monster finally. To their dismay, Khaos yet continued, if even slowed, if even as this cracking began to reach him all, breaking him and not seeming as intimidating as he had been the entire war.

As Feliciano tried to finish a last carving spin around the back of his neck, in his focus, he didn’t notice how Khaos shook, how he reached and swatted him away like an insect. He broke from his flight, falling down and landing harshly on the ground in a bang that made some think it had been a meteor.

“Feliciano!” Ludwig called from the standing he still took on Khaos, stopping his own work to make sure that his husband had survived.

Of course he did, only groaning as he tried to find his own sitting once again.

Once the dust settled and Ludwig could spot him, he sighed in relief, just in the distraction Khaos needed at him to plunge, Ludwig tripping not being able to keep his footing, falling but luckily taking a grasp that kept him hanging. Khaos continued his roars and swings hoping to have him, yet Ludwig always managed a holding that kept him still attached. He refused to let himself fall, not when they were so close…so close to finally ending it all. To make it work, he had to keep his place on Khaos’s body.

Feliciano felt his husbands’ distress, even as he arranged himself, bones, even the ones in the wings he currently possessed, cracking fearsome, symbols on his skin changing, working to get him back to the powerful Ace outlook. Quick he managed to stand, to stretch and roll

until he was standing as proud and even menacing. He could feel his love in danger, lightening up a fury that charged within him, angering, angering and angering until he released it in a powerful swing of fire, grabbing, taking all of Khaos and slamming him hard against the ground in a thrust that shook the entire valley. All his people that fought had to lay down in reverence.

They had done their purpose…now it was Feliciano's turn to make the last front.

Dark shards spread across, more white was seen, Khaos was finding it ever harder to stand, to make again his shield of darkness. In whatever attempt he could still manage, he tried to take Ludwig in his clutches. He thought he could threaten, he thought he could still have an upper hand by putting him at risk, but Feliciano didn't let him, and neither did Ludwig as he bit, as he released and continued on with his own attack, leaving Khaos, even in his immense form, helpless.

Feliciano ran or sometimes flew as the obstacles came, all across the expanse, like a field all for himself to enjoy from and play in. He could already imagine taking this very field free from evil, beautiful Spadian flowers spreading, safe enough for even children to play. Feliciano was reminded of his own childhood with Ludwig doing the same things on the sunny hills of Italy that he had lived. He could imagine their own children laughing and running as they themselves had once.

For them, for that future, he practically shouted to himself as he continued his shredding all across the body, with ease avoiding fumes of darkness or whatever minuscule attack Khaos tried to send on him.

It was becoming less and less as Ludwig dealt with cutting off the parts that created attacks. Khaos couldn't stand any longer, he could only manage a sitting by the time Feliciano reached the back of his neck. He didn't even notice he was there. It was enough for Feliciano to take his harp and finish the last of the carving.

It was time.

Khaos swung at him weakly, Feliciano could avoid it with ease. All of the darkness in his body began to fall, more white appearing to the point that one could confuse him as a symbol of Pisa instead.

"Everyone move away!" He had called with Ace potency in his tone, all shaking as they obeyed, other royals mobilizing a quick escape from the area. Yet of all, Kiku was the only who stayed in his place, his gaze locked up on his Queen despite how he stood by the immensity of Khaos's fallen hip. He could easily be caught in any wail Khaos tried, yet Kiku found it unfair to run away, especially when his King and Queen were still in this fray. He didn't follow the crowds, he went the opposite direction, trying to meet Ludwig or Feliciano.

"Kiku! Kiku!" He heard Abasi shout after him, but he didn't answer, in opposite, he moved faster. He began to reach places that had been emptied, or untouched because they were the most dangerous areas that were left for Feliciano to deal with, and he could tell, as he cough and began to feel stings even with the shields Feliciano had placed on them.

“Ludwig…Feliciano! Ludwig! Feliciano!” He called hoping to reach them. No one… everything was empty and desolate even with Khaos roaring and shaking still. He leaned in failure, in loneliness, thinking that everything will end like this for him in a desperate reach to be with his friends in this moment of need.

Something was coming near, warm, friendly, already a smile he could feel on his back. “Kiku!” Came that excitement that he knew well from his Queen. He smiled and fell into Feliciano’s arms as he swept him off with his speed and flight across the immensity. Despite how the marks glowed on his skin like rubies, the impotent halo, the red wine in his eyes and the great wings…Kiku saw Feliciano true, as any other day in the castle before everything.

“Feliciano, listen, I will not be moving away with the rest. You have to let me help you, and I won’t take any-”

“Ah, good! I actually need you right now.”

Kiku held himself for a moment in embarrassment. “What is it?” He instead went straight to his duty.

“First, we have to pick up Ludwig.” And finally his figure appeared in the distance, a debonair smile as he raised his hand in knowing, no fear at all despite actually standing on Khaos. Feliciano caught him just as some dimming darkness bubbled and exploded in their leave. The remains blended into white with the rest of the ruin Khaos was becoming.

Feliciano, with simple ease, carried both his King and Jack over the last of the terrain, using the ending elevation to raise him up and start escalating high in the air.

“This is it. I’ll be aiming him with the largest power in my possession. It’s one Augusta told me about, using the harp.” He suddenly stopped as he avoided a throw of darkness that Khaos tried to make.

As they continued, he was forced into a sweep that was not the best to be carrying Ludwig and Kiku in. He whistled and in no time came Pookie, offering a stead that Feliciano placed them all in perfect accord. The winged lion didn’t mind at all, he actually purred at knowing the aid he gave, continuing the heights Feliciano intended while successfully avoiding whatever Khaos managed in his last attempts.

“Then…it will finally be over?” Ludwig desperately hoped.

“Not quite. Khaos still possesses something important and we have to take it away before we destroy him.”

Kiku and Ludwig didn’t bother to question what. They just nodded and trusted whatever Feliciano planned. There was no time to hesitate or change especially when they were upon the final horizon.

Feliciano, to be ready, began a calling, a raise of magic from all across the globe, meeting upon him to create wonderful pillars of light, far, large, slowly encaging the area for what his Ace power planned.

“With me, you have to aim, and with me you have to fire a serene Teresa.”

It was a high protective spell to act against large threats. It was mostly used by guards or sorcerers that worked with fire or other sudden emergencies, to protect those they found in wreckages or trying to get out people that were stuck while fires, earthquakes or tsunamis rampaged. Simple, yet with the force they now had, it would be a shield perfect to protect exactly what Feliciano needed. Ludwig and Kiku already began to thread the spell in their palms as Feliciano made Pookie take a pause…finding just the right place. They turned to Khaos’s direction, and despite how he was weakening, his being was still an inferno that they felt coming close to burn them completely.

They weren’t bothered.

Ludwig and Kiku already took their aim as they gathered the magic needed, Ludwig including even some dark magic that could be of great use. Feliciano finally let his harp extend in size, just as these far off pillars shined more, moving at the raise of his arms like giant arrows that worked alone in their own bows of air. Their citizens trembled at their immensity, scared if they would even get out of this attack, if the shields Feliciano had placed on them would work. This seemed too large for them to even witness. And then they lowered, setting their target, the harp burning along with the formation that Feliciano created, his being glowing more in its fire and with his own gold. A gorgeous deep red arrow was formed, engraved with vines of gold that seemed to breathe to Ludwig and Kiku. They almost lost their focus because of it.

It was ready, the aim was set, just as Khaos erupted and tried to reach, tried to swat away Feliciano in his very last attempt. Feliciano only smiled, an intense glow in his eyes as he let go and fired, the arrow, along with the large ones all around him, aiming true at a center that obliterated, blew and exploded. Ludwig and Kiku joined in their own attack, embracing a center where surely laid what Feliciano wanted protected. Although their citizens were blinded in this immense show of power and light, the three Heartian royals saw as clearly as if they were in the purest of waters. Feliciano swam them through it with ease, using his power to protect them as they traversed this fire. His wings grew as extra shield, the gems and marks on his body glowing more to let them survive.

“Is he gone? Is he really gone?” Kiku had to question in the mist.

“Wait…” Feliciano told just as a shrill went throughout, chilling and horrifying, Ludwig and Kiku had to cover their ears from it and only Feliciano went through with it, having to maintain their safe within. He let his arms dance in a particular way that called creation, bringing to him any darkness and purifying it in gold and colors, flying off like petals to join the flourishing of this new field.

He continued this cleanse as he made Pookie ride them throughout, a downward glide that to Ludwig and Kiku seemed like hours. The closer they reached the ground, the more it cleared around them, the more natural blue sky they saw, the more they could breathe, their smile grew and they were confident that no harm as Khaos would ever come again.

Pookie landed on the ground, Ludwig and Kiku taking their descend with ease, walking now in the start of green grass, the dirt there with only but specks of darkness. Feliciano followed

afterwards, still calling with him the remnants, spread across above them in damaged strings that they could think were just strange dark clouds. Feliciano called them all to him, piece by piece making each part disappear in glowing wind, the shrills getting lower and lower until they were only but a squeak in the palm of Feliciano's hands.

Now, as everything around them cleared to the usual rushes of this field, the last bits of darkness were but the ones that swam around the small call, the small wave Feliciano kept of a single hand. Whatever last shout Khaos tried to make, it came out like a child's cry. He tried to whip, but even if it did reach skin, it did nothing, not even redden or create the slightest cut. Ludwig and Kiku stared on stupefied, finding it hard to believe that what was left of Khaos was just these tiny specks that Feliciano kept twirling around.

"And…" a turn down, "…you are…" up, another spin, only but dust left… "…gone."

And there was no more darkness, everything disappeared entirely. Now surrounding them was the natural blow of wind, cleaning the field and bringing the aroma of flowers that was meant.

It was silent, it was peaceful, Feliciano smiled in welcome to this new era, proper with this new sun that came.

Khaos was gone. It was over…it was finally over.

Chapter End Notes

Only two more chapters to go ;)

Chapter 81

Chapter Notes

> Look! A chapter! HOOZA! SO DARN CLOSE OMG! Yes, like always, I apologize for taking so long, tons of things, as usual. I hope the chapter makes do for it…I guess. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

And celebration rang, with shouts and applauses, the swing of flags and surviving weapons decorating the field in wonderful splendor. Some jumped, danced, complete strangers embraced one another or even kissed in the passion of lovers. Roderich and Francis couldn't help but to cry, Elizabeta, Lili and Vash embracing them…not long before they joined in the same tears. Alfred took as many as he could in for the largest group hug he intended to make, much to Arthur's distaste of being squeezed between many of his people. As Yao was trying to find his escape, he bumped into Ivan, who proceeded to take him into a large embrace, the very one the Spadian Jack was trying to avoid. Yet as Ivan took his lip…he didn't find himself minding any longer. He wrapped his arms around the Clubian King's neck and let himself that beautiful bliss.

The three Heartian royals stood alone in this sudden feast. Feliciano had already commanded that none were to come close, and so they yet remained in their field were Khaos's last traces had been, still in the same silence that had welcomed them when Khaos was at last officially defeated.

"What are we waiting for?" Kiku asked, because indeed that was what it felt like they were doing, especially with Feliciano looking on as if…expecting someone to come.

"Is this about that one thing you asked us to protect? That Khaos had?" Feliciano nodded to Ludwig, taking steps forward, right towards this sun rise. Ludwig and Kiku stayed behind and watched, giving Feliciano some space to breathe and focus.

"…he's here," he whispered after the silence he wanted was reached.

It wasn't a message for Ludwig, for Kiku, for anybody there.

"…he's here…I know he's here…" he whispered on, a hand reaching so it could focus on one spot.

The wind that blew now was different, the energy that came ancient, along with the magic and form that even to Ludwig and Kiku, felt as the arise of a person. And there, in a sudden flash, there was a red ball of fire, fitting along with the sun, potent and shinning to them like another burning star.

Feliciano sighed, smiled…and even began to cry. “He’s here…He’s here…” he still repeated.

Something suddenly changed in the air, like an earthquake…but nothing shook, nothing trembled, magic and energy just rained, at first, invisible, like a force that brought everyone to silence as their eyes came to the Heartian royals, to the center of what was occurring. Then there was flashes of light, golden and glittering, blowing and seeming to scream into the skies. Feliciano was engulfed in it, in fact, from him it turned larger, a calming fire blazing, arising into the skies, taking the whole field, in beautiful reds and golds that the Heartian Queen helped to make tall, letting his halo, his marks, his wings, shine on up. It was a storm that reminded them of when Khaos had first turned, but this…although powerful and indeed fearsome at first, it was gentle, caring, a beauty that instead of turning away all, it brought and made them aw in a combine admiration. A form became evident, gigantic and towering, with flowers, jewels and silk to cover…her…in grace. From the rains of this colorful and royal feast, she came, showing herself in all her pure form. She was as high as Khaos had been, looking down to all her people with deep fondness in large ruby eyes. Ah, she was gorgeous. Her curled hair fell down to her knees, crowned with a large golden pillar halo that matched well with the specks of gold in her long red dress, tainted like stars, like constellations. Her skin was marked in long lines of vines and symbols, identical to the ones Feliciano held. They also shared a set of wings, although hers were with a hint of rose, much larger, surely to extend to the next mountains if she spread them open. And then the structure of her face, her smile…Feliciano, Lovino, Renata and all the rest of the Valenti knew she was family. For a moment, they were reminded of Augusto and understood then why he had the perfect namesake. Even as she stood gigantically over them, especially when she kneeled, her reach to the ground soft like wind, none were intimidated, all smiled and welcomed the presence of an Ace.

“…Nonna Augusta,” Feliciano greeted her so meekly once the release was completed.

She looked to him with deep fondness, kneeling and bringing her head much closer to his. Ludwig and Kiku were startled slightly back at being right before a large face like this, if even so beautiful.

“Feliciano…” and she smiled with a ring that surely brought music to the whole valley, “l’hai fatto.” He shook at the realization once again…completed and fulfilled. “A mission that I set upon a thousand years ago, one in which the state of your world and mine was held at a delicate balance. I harbored power through my family, generation by generation, until it was with you that the next alignment found itself with. It was much to put that responsibility on only you, so young and still so new to a ruling of a kingdom. Yet, it was by your hand that it was done. With a belief and effort that I was proud to witness, see it grow and now…I watch as it shines.” Feliciano blushed, so intense that he wanted to hide it, not being able to continue his stare with his great grandmother.

“Of course, I also owe congratulations and compliments to the King and Jack.” Ludwig and Kiku startled, more so when this great Ace bowed to them. “Your own growth, I paid attention to, and it is worthy of your position.” And they couldn’t answer, as nervous and blushing as Feliciano. “And the others…” she turned to meet their gazes in the crowd, their knees shaking and eyes widened as if taking blame. She couldn’t help the chuckle. “Brave you have been, courageous and a great loyalty shown to your kingdom. Your respective Ace I

know is just as proud." They wanted to faint from the honor. Even Alfred was left speechless and without a high comment to say.

"And your people, who without every piece of help they could give…we would not stand victorious here now. I thank you all. You have brought to this world a peace that has never been, new and promising. Darkness has disappeared and now light will always be prominent." Shy cheers and applauses spread, part of the crowds wanted to remain respectful, as presentable as possible for an Ace. Augusta partly rolled her eyes at it, Feliciano giggled at such a human presentation. It was just the ring that brought her giant gaze back to him again.

"You have freed me from your vessel. No doubt you learned it in the Eternal Reserved." Feliciano nodded sheepishly, worried that perhaps it was something she had not wished. "Why so?" She asked and for a moment Feliciano forgot every single language he knew. He needed a moment to bring his words back, leaving a silence that left everyone else with tension.

"I know…you would want to meet him again in person…" was all he could utter.

Ah…of course.

Her expression suddenly changed to something so unsure and weak, a pain that had been there for thousands of years presented. She then turned to the small ball of fire that Feliciano had brought only minutes ago. It looked so insignificant and small to all, yet for her, who reached and engulfed it in the palm of her hand with care, love deep in her eyes, making her flourish the more, it was a worth higher than any gold. She smiled, with a hint of a lake forming in her eyes, standing once again to bring this light closer to her heart. There, between folds of satin, lay the most prominent and beautiful of all the designs on her body. Feliciano could recognize it as the most ancient Heart symbol and the light fitted perfectly to its art.

"Romulus…Romulus…" she prayed his name in relief, caressing it as if he was fully there.

He was…he was truly there.

Ludwig and Kiku exchanged glances with wide eyes and mouths.

"You have to thank Ludwig and the Beilschmidts," and he turned to his husband with such pride, like he was the one that did the magic. Ludwig startled and for a moment didn't understand his part in it. "They carried his soul along, for just the time that you passed through my lineage. It was corrupted…and you saw how Khaos used it for his own purpose." A dark memory that brought gruesome shivers to Ludwig. He turned his attention to Augusta's light and suddenly it was gone. "But he learned to control it, to fight against it… and together we purified it…united it with another part Khaos still held and he is now…with you." Feliciano was joyous, and he knew his great grandmother more so, letting the light bounce and letting herself laugh. Truly a wonder.

"Oh, Feliciano. I could give you the whole world for doing all of this…and in fact." There was indeed a reward that was to be given, and released or not, she would make do Feliciano received it. She extended her large arm long, closed her eyes, and called forward a strong magic, potent and surely meant to break apart the very line that divided their world from

others. It was the kind of power that not even Feliciano knew or didn't think he would ever reach enough to master. This was portal opening, Augusta with an ease creating a large window enough to give her enormous frame passage. Other than just an opening, the edges were decorated and strengthened with beautifully carved pillars, pots and statues that rained on magic and light, with flowers vines of red and gold that bloomed before their eyes and seemed to dance at the welcome of their Ace. Inside its frame was just light, reflecting and glimmering in pinks wonderfully. What was on the other side, they couldn't see, but it awaited them patiently, yet the three royals were hesitant, as if a bar was still being held in front of them.

Augusta smiled at them, "come." A barefoot went easily in, just as the waters and dives Feliciano remembered from the Interludes. She let her whole body go in its taking, with her dress, hair, wings and halo. A single hand gave a final wave to all her people and she was gone, only leaving behind the light of the portal. Kiku, Ludwig and Feliciano were yet frozen…but Feliciano was the one to take a deep breath and dared to be the first to take a step. It was just like the interludes…there was nothing to fear. It was the example and leadership Ludwig and Kiku followed, matching along together to be granted passage as a single force.

Feliciano recognized this feeling of going between, the feel as if water purifying you into a new world, while Kiku and Ludwig were startled at this wonderment, almost tripping in their welcome. With the change of the portal, Ludwig and Kiku were granted their very own form. Both with reddish and golden marks, wings, Ludwig's a darker red while Kiku's were almost orange. They shone with strong halos, of fire, heavy surely if it was back in their own world…but here it was as light as another strand in their hair. Their clothes turned into richness and beauty as the very ones Augusta had shown herself in, to the style of their province, making clear their origins, the three making quite a trio as they stood above a stage that put them to look below to what this world was.

They were left breathless, almost fainting at the colors, the sound of the creatures that roamed freely and confident, palaces and palaces, piling up, shinning with the rarest of crystals and forms, with water, routes, trees and flowers cascading down to different floating islands. Clouds and mist seemed to grant them this flight, this place in between the folds of the universe, perfect like heaven.

"What…what…" Kiku tried to word but was still too taken to really continue what he meant to ask.

"What is this place?" Ludwig somehow managed to reach.

"The heavens," And Augusta appeared beside them, not gigantic, but matching with their own statures, yet still decorated as beautifully. She placed comforting and welcoming hands on their shoulders, leading them, with the way she practically flew forward, telling them to follow her. She easily went over the precipice, with each step creating a path of golden bricks, shaped with clouds and shine, a hint of pink to them that the three royals couldn't resist their own step towards.

They passed well-turned spirits and souls, riding happily on the backs of dragons, phoenixes or St. Marks, each animal decorated just as gorgeously as their human counterparts. They

spotted trees and flowers that they had never seen before, overflowing from roofs, some even floating, in the control of those who wanted to make them fly or make them sprinkle the air.

Feliciano had to try and remember every detail, every portrait, every scene painted on walls, the capture of statues, or nature in vases, bricks, sidewalks, glasses and crystals reflecting more whatever shine decided to present itself as they walked on.

The deeper they went, the more came to gather, shouting, congratulating, in an array of different languages, some their own but as it was spoken two hundred years ago. From their wear, their marks, their wings or halos, they saw people from a span of many years, Feliciano recognizing many of their clothes from old paintings.

Augusta continued to lead them through this celebration, floating them through the streets, the golds, between arches of sapphire, pillars in diamonds and green vines coming alive through every wall. Even as the songs and shouts were directed at them, the three royals, taken still by what they saw, couldn't raise their hands, couldn't utter a word, their eyes still occupied taking every detail, every movement, every color. Augusta kept leading them through crevices and wondrous corners, until she could expose them to surely the four largest palaces in the realm.

Nothing in their world could compare to their tallness, their majesty, shine and as Augusta laid them back on the ground, right before the road that could lead to her red and golden one, the three royals felt unworthy to step on such a pavement. They were left no other choice as Augusta blew away with ease the road for them she had created, bringing them to the center of this feast, to the loudest of all the cheers, and also the very center of their universe. They noticed then three beings come, one in blue, the other green, and one in yellow. Even as they stood in their same stature, the Heartians could feel nothing but power and magic from them, almighty and way above whatever reaches they could reach even when they were right there. They knew they were the other Aces. Artem, Maiara and Jabbar. They came to meet their fellow sister…who they hadn't seen like this in surely centuries. In an act that was utterly human, they all came into an embrace, together, in an union that Feliciano swore he could see their entire world shine in. Augusta let herself go to introduce forward the royals chosen for her own kingdom, the three surely shaking and with eyes of enchantment…but also panic. They bowed, as low to the ground, kneeled and hands extended as they were taught in the very rare case they were in front of all four Aces.

"No need, stand." Artem commanded, and quick, like they had been scolded, they stood, precise and orderly. "No such greetings are needed."

"It is us that should bow," Maiara reminded as she started, the rest of the three following in her lead, their thanks large as their knees reached the ground and their hands came to them in reverence.

They wanted to say something…wanted to tell them that it was not necessary…they didn't deserve this, shown as if Aces themselves. Despite everything, they were still only human, not beings that created this entirety. Yet…it was an honor…one that strained their words and their actions, embarrassingly only standing there agape…it was only Feliciano who began to cry, having to put his arms to himself to try and keep his feelings under some kind of control.

“Oh, please, please stop! Stand!” He in the end had to shout at them. And all four rose up with smiles and laughter.

“You have saved your world,” Jabbar continued.

“And through it, our own, here in the Heavens,” Augusta spread her arms to show it, even to the souls that celebrated and cheered from their heights, in their celestial homes and days. Truly beauty, a jewel, shinning eternally in colors that now Feliciano really hoped he could remember to sketch it all to his memory.

“As well as the Interludes, the very passage and line that balances all our worlds. If it wasn’t for your actions…all of it could have been gone,” Artem continued. “It still stands, by your efforts.”

Maiara then chuckled, “with the use of wisdom, your power, the trust you placed not only on one another, but your people had on you.”

“And above all, love being the driving force that stood against all. Ludwig, Feliciano, your love truly defeated Khaos,” Augusta resonated some words Augusto had said himself. Ludwig and Feliciano blushed, turning towards one another wanting more than ever to kiss and hug each other in that very love that won this war. Oh, if Augusto…that reminded Feliciano. He turned and looked towards whatever floating islands, to whatever rush of people…hoping to find those familiar curls he himself inherited.

“Feliciano!” Came that known shout.

Just like that, Feliciano was almost on the ground from the force his grandfather greeted him in, his embrace just the same, with celebration and pride that just had to be showcased even before the Aces. Of course, Kiku and Ludwig couldn’t be left out from it. Once Augusto made the space, he took both the King and Jack to the same embrace, laughing and practically dancing in circles.

How they have missed these joyous little feasts between themselves, loud and happiness glowing for all to witness.

“I’m so proud, so proud for all of you. You have done amazing!” He shouted, going as far as to even kiss Ludwig and Kiku, both left dumbfounded at such an action, but they smiled at it and took it as but another way to shout celebration. Feliciano hanged himself over him, laughing and letting himself be that child that long ago used to do just that. In heaven, before the Aces, it didn’t matter. He would let everyone know how much he loved and how dear was his grandfather to him.

But his grandfather wasn’t alone, with him came tailing a whole group, wearing all similar wears of reds and golds, a symbol that they all shared, proof of being Heartian, Italian, and more specifically, Valenti.

“Oh! Vieni! Vieni! You have to meet your family!” He pulled Feliciano and the rest to this large crowd, all with the famous Valenti curls, from blondes to brunettes, even an occasional red-head. From distinct and strong facial features, to the simple ones like his own. Some were

very tall, others beautifully plum, some, whether men or women, had short hair above their ears, others had none, or some had it falling down their back. It was all to the styles of the times they were born into. Feliciano was shy to meet them, even if indeed they were all family, but it was unexpected, it was too much…yet he didn't mind giving his greetings, hugging even some he had heard much about, going on with random chats as if they had known each other all their lives. The Aces didn't mind this, they let Feliciano this reunion with his family…it would be good persuasion with what they were about to offer.

"Feliciano," Augusta called him forward, open arms, and Feliciano rushed to it, not at all hesitating in the hold he took of her hands. Warm, comforting and like home. Augusta shook them and suddenly she found herself nervous to say what she wanted. But a turn to the Aces, a nod, an approval, and of course, a hurry and excitement, and Augusta turned to her great grandson determined.

"Feliciano, what you have done, is deserving of an award."

"Nonna, really, you don't-"

"Amore, please let me…I promised this and it is something you must come along and take." A deep breath, a silence suddenly coming, no one daring to disturb the words of an Ace. It was quite eerie how the entire heavens just fell silent for this. "As I have told, as I prophesied and the other Aces and I have made ready for centuries…in the hopes that Khaos was indeed defeated…" she breathed, she prepared, "Feliciano…you must come to live with me in the heavens now and become…" she turned, pulling him them closer to the road that will lead to her palace, all of a sudden presenting itself with more shine. "The new Ace of Hearts."

Suddenly, angels came, marching like an army, only to decorate the road, raising flags upon flags to decorate in welcome, surely for a pathway they wanted the Heartian Queen to take. Some played drums and trumpets, added then with the cheer of the crowds, already celebrating as if Feliciano had already passed the palace gates…making it officially his new home. Then, a creature, a St. Mark walked towards him, having journeyed from the Heartian Ace palace. This one was large, majestic, decorated with more jewels, with armors that could go against meteors and surely with a roar that could cause earthquakes in his world. It was Fabius, Augusta's own St. Mark like Pookie was to Feliciano. The lion, now small, cowered on Feliciano's shoulder, intimidated by this one…even if it was his father. The St. Mark bowed to Feliciano and the Queen did so back, the creature seeming to smile and shine along with the celebration, moving aside for when Feliciano came forward. Augusta cuddled herself towards him and the Lion, no matter how godly, leaned towards her in the same devotion.

Ludwig and Kiku on the other hand, stilled, the news only downcasting them, not even the feast around them enough to bring them back into light. Ludwig…tried hard to hide how already he was breaking apart inside, defeated…like he had already lost Feliciano over a precipice he would never reach for him again.

He knew…he knew this would happen…he knew this would come…if what they wanted occurred…this was to be the next step, the finality that settled everything and made an ending to this story. It's one of the reasons he had tried to keep him apart after the eight year gap,

why he refused to accept his feelings as well as Feliciano's, refusing any kind of advance so Feliciano could accept it all as he deserved.

He had wanted this not to hurt, he sometimes liked to daydream that he would applaud and only wave Feliciano some sort of goodbye that will settle well for an eternity. He would turn and march on with a smile on his face. But here now…he couldn't move, couldn't say a word but shake and try to hold down the tears that surely wanted to burst and reveal the moment of weakness this was. Kiku must have noticed…he must be feeling the same way, and they gazed between one another in a moment of understanding and trying to reach some comfort.

"Should we…?" Kiku surely questioned if there was a way to stop this, to place themselves as a hold to what this future could be. Ludwig, with a deep breath, looked away, ready as if to leave that instant away from the heavens. Suddenly it didn't hold the same charm anymore.

"No…this is…this is…the greatest award that could be given. Glory that Hearts, our world, neither we can ever match with," he sighed, still trying to make himself believe those words. "We will congratulate him…and leave." And Ludwig, without even looking at Kiku, could just feel his utter refusal, but in part he did have to agree with those words, instead, hiding to himself whatever he meant to say, what he meant to act.

"He'll…he'll make a great Ace…at least we'll know were under right guidance…and the balance of the universe is in good hands." This was goodbye and there was not more to be done.

As Ludwig tried to take a last grasp of his husband between the still celebrating multitudes… he only wished he could properly say goodbye…hold him and kiss him one last time before anything…but by the looks of it…it didn't seem likely. He sighed and accepted that whatever glimpses he could get would be the last he would have of him.

Yes…to Feliciano…this was all glorious. The floating islands, the wonderful colors, the magic, the richness of these palaces and castles, of the roars of the people around him. Yes… it was an eternal celebration that would keep him mighty for eons. He thought about how he still possessed the hand of creation, looking down to his hands as if already he could see everything he could bring alive…whole new worlds, cosmos and universes extending far beyond this one. Yet in that expanse…he spotted clearly the bearing gems. Two identical ones on each side of his hands…both shinning like their own sun, lighting and bringing life to a world…he had promised someone he would help create. It was in that moment he turned to Ludwig…who refused to meet his eyes, yet he saw sorrow in them that Feliciano shared in, suddenly the colors and music greying and lifeless to him. Those around him easily saw how his smile disappeared, and the shine in his eyes was gone. They silenced at such display, giving him space, thought, and the Aces could show their question as to why he know saddened when he was at the center of such an opportunity. Feliciano was scared to utter these words, here at the mercy of the Aces…but he had to insist, had to make them understand.

"And…if I don't want to?" He placed the idea, one that surprised all, not thinking that it would be something that Feliciano would dare consider when what they would give they thought would be above whatever Hearts had.

“Feliciano, these are the heavens, a position as an Ace, with riches and everything you want at your fingertips. Why would there be a reason to deny?” Augusta tried to persuade.

“Who’s going to take care of my children?”

Augusta widened as if she was just finding out…when in reality…she had completely forgotten about that detail, having to reconsider, organize, with a glance to the other Aces and they quickly came to another decision.

“They shall be born here and stay with you.”

“Away from their father? From their grandparents…their family…their home. Leave everything behind as if it was all nothing…”

A long silence before Jabbar dared speak, “Are you truly only speaking about the children? Or is this about yourself?” With how Feliciano widened, it made sure that Jabbar hit straight to what the Queen felt.

“Yes…it’s also what I feel.” Here he turned to his Jack and King, a large smile that showed true to a promise. “This…this place is beautiful. A dream, a wonder, this chance…rare…perhaps I would be the only one for centuries to come that will be granted something like this…yet…” he began to walk towards his friend, his husband, no one around him daring to intrude his sure and set path. “Hearts…the world…mean so much to me. Enough it is my heaven, my place. It is home.” Now he stood right in front of them, his words now for them to hear. “When I was born…you saw someone in me that could save the world…but you also gave me a position, you gave me a duty as the Queen of Hearts.” Close yet to his Jack and King, he turned to face the Aces again. “Many times…I doubted it…I had wished and prayed that it wouldn’t be my destiny…I even tried to run away from it once…but now I see that it is my place, it is my calling…it will be wrong of me to turn away from it now…” He grasped one hand of Kiku, another of Ludwig’s. “My reign is still so young…there is still so much I can do in Hearts, so much I can help the whole world with, so much I should be there for. Nonna Augusta…you’re back again…the position is for you as the universe intends.” He hoped they understood, he hoped he wasn’t creating an offence, wasn’t disrespecting. But as Kiku and Ludwig grasped their own hold on their Queen’s hand…Feliciano smiled and suddenly stood higher, understanding then…there was no need to worry for any spite of gods. He knew then that they were in no position to react such a way against them, especially after saving their worlds.

His next words had a confidence as tough as the pillars and gold the buildings here were made of. “I want to stay in Hearts. I want to stay with my people. I want to stay with my Jack…and I want to stay with my husband.” The devotion, the utter love these two exchanged, made all the four Aces realize that they were naïve to think that Feliciano would chose a life away from this man. “I know my place…and it is with my family.”

To his surprise, the Aces smiled between one another, a new energy spread…and it wasn’t bad or punishing. Augusto began to chuckle, the rest of the Valenti there joining him, with laughs that shared joy across all the souls present.

“Very well then…you will stay to finish your reign in Hearts,” Artem spoke in decision.

“When it is done, and you have lived your life as any Queen, you will be welcomed here,” Maiara continued.

“The same shall await you then, and Ludwig, Kiku and every important member in your life shall all have a safe assurance of an afterlife here,” Jabbar said.

“Till then, we will await you. Now, we wish you farewell, a wondrous life to give to the world and to your family,” Augusta wished, coming over to give an embrace that to Feliciano was just like those of his family. He enjoyed from this warmth, wrapping his own arms around her as echoes of new celebration began to ring. In this hold, Feliciano released magic that had been weighted on him since birth…the hand of creation. In a wonderful swirl of platinum and gold, it was transferred back to Augusta. She splendored more in its shine as it placed her back as creator and superior goddess. When it was finished, she welcomed in the rest of the Valenti, and Feliciano enjoyed the most from his grandfather, surely to be the last for a long time. He had his chance to give his own to his grandmother, Helena, who he had never had the chance to meet in his world…he saw a lot of her in Lovino…and suddenly he already missed him and his nephew.

“Go and live,” his grandfather wished, and with those words, Feliciano had to tearfully let go of them, turning to then place them with Ludwig, who grasped Feliciano…relieved beyond however he had felt before. Without a care on who stared, where he was…he spun Feliciano to have him in front, hands adjusted on his waist, to pull him into a kiss, strong, magical, these forms giving it a touch that made sparks surely glow all around them. When they released and looked into their eyes…Feliciano truly saw that he had made the right decision. Ludwig raised his hands and let his fingers caress on the jewels…excited and hoping for a bright future with a new family just for them.

Any threats were away…Ludwig could now celebrate the coming of his own children…and that he was to return to Berlin with Feliciano.

Augusta smiled and opened her arms to create a portal, this one small, just the space for all three of the Hearts royals to make their passing back home. Kiku waved his goodbye before he rushed through. Ludwig and Feliciano refused to let go of their hands, determined to pass together. Ludwig had begun his engulfing, but Feliciano spared a last glance back…

The last he saw was celebration still ringing, chorus surely sang and orchestras played, the Aces watching them leave dutifully and then beside Augusta…the light, the one Feliciano had saved from the cage of Khaos, as well as with power from Ludwig…it began to grow, large enough until it was a figure as Augusta. It began to clear, it began to come alive…and for the first time Feliciano had seen what his great grandfather Romulus actually looked like.

Dark hair in silk waves, the same that was on his beard, but despite it, Feliciano could see a long and strong face, handsome, it slightly reminded him of Lovino. Green eyes, likes leaves and grass, a stature, a smile, a last gratitude to his own grandson before he turned to his long missed wife. They held to each other with all the strength needed for centuries. What more they would do, Feliciano didn’t see, he had passed through, everything beginning to erase in bright light.

He left behind the heavens to return home.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter is the very last…oh boy.

Chapter 82

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

20 years later…

„-and it was so!“ The light of the sun outside today made the golden paint shine brighter as Feliciano raised the brush high in the air, finalizing the story. “Kiku, Ludwig and I returned from the heavens! I got what I wanted, and that was staying in our world to fulfill the rest of my reign, being able to stay and stand in front of all of you today,” He practically danced as he faced the large group of children, mouths and eyes wide with the purest attention. “The Great Turn began, and I was able to help the rest of the Kings, Queens and Jacks in bringing change and new advancements, the ones that help us live as we do today.” He walked across to the large canvas. Ginormous, taking the whole wall of this room. The children’s eyes followed him at every instance. “With determination, and of course, magic, our world was restored to peace and beauty. Seven months later and the eldest princes were born. My life was finally everything I wanted.” He twirled as he focused again on this part of the painting. He was trying to finish the last details to the crowns he had drawn on the then young infant princes, Heinrich and Alessandro. It was only a small speck in the largeness of this painting, showing a feast from Nineteen years ago. It had celebrated a year after Khaos’s defeat. All the kingdoms had agreed to make it a holiday, a day to relieve once again the victory they had felt, to tell the story, the history of their world as it truly was and let it ring on for generations to come. Today specifically marked the twenty years, and Feliciano was in a deep hurry to finish this painting, one that had taken him eight months of work. It was only these two crowns on the depiction of his eldest sons, and even with a large group of loud and curious children behind him, he was determined to have it done.

“And that’s really it?” One child asked, in her tone, calling for more.

Feliciano tried hard to not chuckle at the disappointment they all shared. “What more could I tell?”

“I expected more dragons in this,” one boy…Prince Ethan, complained…as expected from Alfred’s youngest son.

“I did mention your father rode one in the war, Ethan.”

“But everyone should have been riding a dragon!”

“Wasn’t a St. Mark enough?”

“No…a dragon.” The children laughed, Feliciano joining before rolling his eyes and focusing on the painting again.

“Well I think Pookie had to be the most elegant stead to fight against Khaos,” another girl boasted, said little St. Mark cuddled in her arms, the little girl happily petting the creature,

who purred at the touches and the compliment.

“He was indeed,” Feliciano smiled, giving himself the little break to send it to the St. Mark.

Then, a certain little girl…one who had no reason to raise her hand to speak, shaking, so much energy in her simple seat, practically screaming for her father’s attention. She definitely learned that from Ludwig…Feliciano rolled his eyes and reminded himself to speak about that to him later. “Yes, Giovanna, amore?” He allowed his youngest daughter to speak.

Her laugh and eyes were big, praised in just being chosen to speak. “Why did Vatti never tell us you refused his marriage proposal the first time?” There was real curiosity, but chuckles spread and Feliciano tried hard not to share in the same laughter.

“Well, after everything, he gets extremely embarrassed about it. After all, he’s your father and he doesn’t want to look…like…uh…”

“Like an idiot?” One kid suggested.

Feliciano glared, “no…he just…wants you to think the best of him.”

Giovanna, shyly, had to admit, “he was kind of an idiot though.”

And this time there was no one that could hide from the laugh.

Perhaps this was not the best time for Ludwig to come in. “And what are we talking about here?” He tried to come in with intimidation and power…but it was difficult when he held a baby, the young one with his mouth on a toy, drooling and surely droplets falling to the rich capes and fabrics he was adorned with.

All the children gasped. “Prince Friedrich! Prince Friedrich!” Like a swarm they came to their King, cooing and hoping for some kind of touch at the new prince. Ludwig, even after having seven children of his own, seemed overwhelmed by this large number of preschoolers surrounding him like predators. There was no crevice he could escape through, resulting in holding his son high to avoid him getting lost in the ordeal. Little Friedrich went on munching and didn’t seem at all bothered by this attention.

“All right, all right, settle down, give his majesty some space.” They did, although their wonder still lay on Friedrich. The only one who remained close was Giovanna, embracing her father’s legs in welcome, looking up to him with a bright blue beg. “Can I hold him, Vatti? Can I hold him now?”

Ludwig gazed over to Feliciano for a decision. His queen nodded and so he sighed and settled with leaving the boy in his sister’s arms. The kids did well to still leave the space, although they asked on and waited for some kind of attention from the prince, Ludwig admitting that Giovanna did well to hold her little brother and protect him. He moved over to his husband confident, a kiss, an embrace, with the ever present fire, and luckily the kids were too distracted to really see any of it. In a release, with smirks and clear intentions in their eyes, Ludwig’s eyes fell on the fresh golden paint still on Feliciano’s brush.

“You’re still working on it? The servants will be coming up any minute to pick it up and place it for the exhibition,” Ludwig worried.

“And they will have a finished piece!” Feliciano pointed to the very last detail he was missing, the crowns on their eldest sons, finished with splendor in gold and finalizing it all in a perfect picture.

Ludwig awed, moving back to take the full design.

It was a large crowd, from all four kingdoms and every single kind of province. Flags, instruments, shields and uniforms were showcased in clear and bountiful colors, across every space, balcony and roofs, a parade coming from the castle only bringing and heightening the crowds. At the very front were all kinds of heightened soldiers, the other Kings and Queens. Ludwig had suggested Feliciano drew himself at the very center, for he was the hero that had granted them that.

By now, Feliciano, in his continuing reign, granted all kinds of successes to his people. A network of communication was established, tubes, messengers and animals working at better speeds and structures to bring messages quicker, granting a more united speech with all the kingdoms. Feliciano had made and signed treaties of trade, that all shall be educated, now with technologies shared and created, granting them all kinds of advances they had never thought possible. Blimps and other flying contraptions placed them at equal level to the St. Marks or dragons or phoenixes that flew in the skies. Better routes were placed, bridges that were marvels and new landmarks that towered and rivaled the ancient ones. Feliciano had also suggested tools and ways to better the agriculture, the fauna, all now in strengths and beauties that Ludwig had never remembered seeing in such a way until Feliciano’s reign. He had made his mark to be forever told in their history. He had brought back the tale of Augusta, for the streets to be decorated in her image again and her feats recognized. With his combination to the story, many were already calling him Feliciano the Greatest, much to his incredible dislike.

Yet despite all of this, Feliciano painted himself to the side, holding Alessandro, with Ludwig to his other side holding Heinrich. One wouldn’t know they were the royals of Hearts if it wasn’t pointed out or they didn’t know them already. He sighed…accepting whatever reason Feliciano had for it.

Next was to point out how young they had been here…both twenty one years old…innocence even if all they had gone through, smoothened…surely less hair. Feliciano still looked young despite being in his forties. Yes he had his wrinkles, his scars, but his smile still somehow made them shine. He only had a bit of stubble on him now. He tried to shave often, many times shaming the hair on his face. The one on his head, though, had grown longer, many times, as now, deciding to tie it back in a small ponytail to keep it from falling on his face when he worked. Ludwig had suggested many times to cut it, but Feliciano always glared and berated him for even suggesting it.

Ludwig was one to talk…he had let himself the beard that now covered his face completely, more white than blond. Feliciano told him constantly that one day he would have more hair on his beard than on his head…for in the past years it had begun to lessen, Ludwig having to

try all kinds of products in the hopes he didn't end up bald. He was terrified, but nevertheless Feliciano always made clear that he would love him no matter what.

"Magnificent," Ludwig complimented, when he knew he had seen all in the painting.

Feliciano smiled and came much closer to him, leaning his head on his shoulder, enjoying this peace while the children were still distracted with their youngest son.

There was a knock at the door, gentle, soothing, yet excited, the couple already knowing who it was.

"Nonna!" Giovanna shouted, of course bringing along her brother. The little boy instantly brought his hands up, wanting Renata's attention and hold. The now grandmother of nine children, had no problem with taking and cooing the youngest of all…and hopefully the last. She kissed him and let Giovanna caress around her leg, her attention then falling on her son and son-in-law.

"Feliciano, amore, the servants are here to pick up the painting. I also just received a telegram from Heinrich and Alessandro. They shall be entering Berlin in an hour."

All the Beilschmidt-Valenti got clearly excited, equal smiles between all.

"What are we here for then? Come, let's go!" Feliciano shouted and clapped, wanting to hurry everyone out in an instant. He had a deep need to see his eldest after they had been away for half a year fulfilling their tour of the kingdoms.

What was once the journey that the King and Queen of Hearts had to make to get all the Validity spheres, was now a tourist route that many dared to follow. It was now a new tradition that every member of their family had to make it at least once in their lifetimes.

All the children joined in that excitement as they all, including Giovanna, made their way out in shouts, running down the stairs in a way that had Ludwig and Feliciano going behind in worries any of them could trip. At least they knew Friedrich was safe in Renata's arms, the infant laughing in her arms and refusing to depart from the embrace.

It was a long route from the very top of the castle, passing by servants finishing the last decorative touches for the festivities, waving to the King and Queen, the littlest princess and prince, before they hurried, yet already everything was such a splendor that the children didn't bother. Soon enough they were away from eye sight, Ludwig signaling some of the guards to head off and keep an extra watch. It was here that Friedrich became unsettled, kicking and cries coming that had Feliciano hurrying to his mother's side to figure out what could be the problem now.

"Hungry." The two proclaimed.

"Lunch was merely an hour ago. Friedrich ate more than enough," Ludwig knew, he had been the one to feed him.

“Ludwig, this boy is clearly a Valenti. With an insatiable stomach, thinking of nothing but food,” Renata said proudly.

Ludwig groaned, knowing well they had to go back to the kitchen and prepare something new for the young prince.

“You two go ahead. I’m sure you have to hurry the others as well. I’ll bring him good and ready for the ceremony.”

“Grazie, mamma,” Feliciano sighed in relief, Ludwig even more.

She hurried away, both parents waving to the boy who only but mildly waved back…he was now more focused on his grandmother. But now came the issue of getting the other three ready. They knew Giovanna would eventually meet them…

There were shouts, clangs and rushing steps, known laughter echoing down this hall.

“Come, quick, hurry!” One girl shouted.

“They can’t catch us now!”

And they both knew this voice well.

Ludwig had already raised his arm, just as two ten year olds crashed into it, surely taking the winding staircase that came to meet them just now as an escape. Both were wearing toy armors, carrying wooden shields and swords, surprised and stunned at the two people they had hoped they wouldn’t meet.

Yes, the best they could adorn children for in their play…and yet metal pots on their heads as helmets.

“And who have we angered today?” Feliciano accused, already knowing.

“Nobody!” Alissa had shouted before Aldrich could, but the young boy was trembling, avoiding eyes, biting his lips.

“Really?” Ludwig looked deeper at his son and he just couldn’t take it any longer.

“We took Mrs. Caden’s pudding pots!” He blurted out as if it was squished out of him.

“Aldrich!” The girl shouted, annoyed and now revealed.

“They were the perfect pots to use for our game! We were going to bring them back. We promised!”

The parents were finding it hard to believe.

Alissa and Aldrich pouted, victims in misery, somehow innocent and only blamed. Ludwig and Feliciano couldn’t resist long enough. It was a holiday after all.

Ludwig let his arm fall down, granting instant freedom and pass to continue whatever game they were in the middle of. They shouted and laughed, making a run for it before it was interrupted again.

“And Aldrich, remember, you are expected at the ceremony. You do know your brothers are coming back, right?” Feliciano reminded. “I suggest you finish and start getting ready.”

They could feel both the children rolling their eyes and plotting some way they could escape from this.

“You heard your Papa,” Ludwig made clear.

Aldrich sighed and nodded before he decided on hurrying down the halls with his friend.

“Hm, they remind me of someone,” Feliciano hinted with a grin.

“We couldn’t have been that misbehaving!” And Feliciano wondered if he had forgotten it all, laughing and taking his hand to continue their walk across the castle.

“Let them be children, let him have his friend. If I recall, Aldrich is at the age our families decided we would be engaged.”

“Um…should we…?” He pointed to the direction they had taken.

“We promised we wouldn’t interfere at all,” Feliciano reminded. “Let them decide on their own.”

They continue with their overall mission.

Friedrich, Giovanna, Aldrich…now where could that girl be? They passed by her room hoping to find her, their eldest daughter, and as expected, she was…the only one who was actually getting ready for the festivities.

The girl had inherited beauty well, a grace and splendor that was true of a princess. She was the only one that used the full services of the servants, letting them pamper her, present her with all kinds of dresses, jewelry and make up to decorate her skin as majestically as possible. Ludwig and Feliciano had a hard time wondering from where she had gotten like this. At least they knew they were in the last steps, spraying perfumes and fixing any wrinkles in the dress she had chosen. Red with glitter of gold, the sparkle matching well with the makeup and golden band tying up her brown curled hair.

“Bella, cara,” Feliciano had to compliment her.

She perked up from whatever lulling she kept in her head as they finished. She instantly stood up with a shrill going over to her father, surely begging to show him. “Papa, papa! What do you think?” She twirled and showed its show of light, the parents knowing well it was sure to grab attention and longing looks. Ludwig was liking it less the older she got, while Feliciano on the other hand, “Signora Vera has really outdone herself this time! You look like a jewel!” And he kissed her head with a powerful intent that could be heard all across the room.

“I know! I know! This one has to be my favorite! Oh, please tell me the preparations are done! I want to head out!” Like it was a show she wanted to play and be the main role of.

“That’s just what we came here for,” Ludwig said.

She squealed and already made her way out of the room…well not before leaving a last kiss on the cheek for Ludwig. “I’ll be waiting!” She waved and made her way serene and ready.

Now it was only Isabella.

Ludwig groaned and Feliciano asked for patience.

They went to her room where there was no sign. She had left it orderly and precise…but no hint of a fast preparation. They checked all the places she could have found some last minute enjoyment. The libraries, the training grounds, even at the guard quarters…but still nothing. They resorted to checking the kitchen, any of the studies she sometimes took to writing.

The clock was ticking, already servants were beginning to expect them to get ready. They were minutes away from the welcoming. The parents groaned and gave up, hoping desperately she would somehow meet them at the balcony. Ludwig and Feliciano hurried to the ceremonial suites of the day, red with whites and golds, jewels raining, their kingdom crowns resting well on the top of their heads. Hand in hand they hurried how they could down the halls, without messing too much of these imperial wears, the most extravagant, perfect for how the day was to be celebrated.

Pookie met up with them, cuddling his small form against Feliciano’s cheek before he landed on the ground and took his large form, deserving of it. It was as this that he had helped them vanquish Khaos twenty years ago.

Soon they heard the roar, the gathering of so many people coming to celebrate. Augustino peeked his head from down the hall, waving to his uncles to hurry. He was just as quickly shoved back, surely his father insisting he stayed in his place for the introduction.

The light of the day poured into the hall they turned, splendid, with blue and then the colors of the decorations of this hall to compliment. They noticed Gilbert, Antonio, Lovino, Augustino, just at their length now, people getting used to calling him more ‘Augusto’ than little Augustino. Clara was the only small one here, her wave so sweet as she noticed her uncles’ welcome. Feliciano gave them a quick wave before they had to move past them, over to their parents, Renata who held Friedrich now in long ceremonial robes. His attention quickly turned to his parents’, fretful in his grandmother’s hold as he raised his arms in begs to be held by either of them. Feliciano offered to take him, instant smiles between them, identical, along with the same bounce of their brown curls. It was in this moment that they heard the rushing steps of Aldrich and Giovanna, reaching and even pulling at both their parents to let them know they were there. They stuck to Ludwig’s side, while Ludwig enjoyed caressing their blond hair as he then motioned them all to keep their way forward.

Kiku, Mariana and Analiese were already waiting at the balcony, the girls eager for their parents' words to begin it all.

The six of them reached the balcony, the air festive, the crowds were loud and expecting, shouts mended into a symphony that was like the spirit of the city come to life. It all looked so gorgeously beautiful from up here. And yet…as Ludwig and Feliciano looked about…no sign of Isabella.

They couldn't be any later, the crowds were slowly silencing for their speech. They had to start now, with Isabella there or not.

With the hands Ludwig and Feliciano held together, and with a sign to Kiku, they raised it out for another wave of cheers, for flowers to fly and sparks to surely alight all the four kingdoms.

Between the multitudes they tried to find the royal families. Sure enough, Alfred, Arthur and Yao were there. With them the three princes and Yao's own young child, who they had decided would be more a fit to the Spade Kingdom than the Club Kingdom, where his father was from…King of Clubs actually. Ivan was with Elizabeta and Roderich, their teenage son with them. Then the Diamond royals were all there, no heirs to show from either three, but yet beautiful and spectacular on their own, Lily especially towering. There was also Kandake with her people, much more numerous than they would have been twenty years ago. Now they had lands, flags and cultures to showcase between all the ones present in the crowds. She herself had started her own family, with another woman who was there holding the youngest of three. Ludwig and Feliciano hoped they had noticed the greet specifically sent their way.

The silence settled, everyone was waiting. They had to start. Feliciano took his breath and made his position, ready to be loud, for his voice to echo across all the city…this needed some residue power of when he had actually been Ace.

"My people! Spades, Clubs, Diamonds and Hearts!" And each group shouted and celebrated at their mentioning. "Jabbar, Artem, Maiara and Augusta are surely smiling at all us from the heavens. Proud and believing. Twenty years after and we are standing as the perfect image that they kept in their minds long ago in the realms of the first heaven." Feliciano practically sang, leading an orchestra, Ludwig thought, smiling as he then stood forward and continued himself.

"Twenty years and we can still sleep in peace and security, all thanks to the men and women that fought and sacrificed everything on this day, for all to be standing here in glory."

Kiku continued, "We spare now our silence for all the people that made their passing, that we miss and wish…could be with us in this celebration…yet we smile knowing that they are in the glory of the heavens, waiting on their return to our world."

With the loud bang of a drum, it was called and all bowed, each giving their thoughts to that particular person. Feliciano remembered Feliks, Aaron, Sam and Timoteo, as he always did when this moment came. He hoped they were happy in the heavens, that they would be promised a great return to a new life. Their families, that he knew where in the plentitude, he had gotten to know and help, wishing he could give his condolences, his warmth, but in this moment, all he could do was join in their miss and hope that there was a connection that let them know they were not alone and that the future still remained bright.

The time passed and just as this new bang of the drums, did the feast and happiness begin again. It was at this moment that Ludwig and Feliciano came to a heavy realization…the person who was supposed to take an important role in the next part of the speech…the reason why they had been so adamant in looking for her…still wasn't there. Everyone in the balcony instantly faltered as the silence continued, looking about them, as if she was simply hiding and meant to come with a big entrance…and she was only late. But the parents knew her… Isabella wasn't that kind of person.

"What do we do?" Ludwig whispered. Feliciano only stuttered, now praying to the Aces that his daughter would just pop out in some theatrical event, all part of some excellent plan that would crown the day. But no…that's not something she would do either.

He sighed, and gazed on to Ludwig, his eyes already saying that perhaps they should just continue on their own. Ludwig grimaced and Feliciano prepared himself to stand in whatever defense Isabella called for when Ludwig decided to give her one of his harsh speeches. Just when Feliciano was ready to utter the next words, there was a sudden commotion, pushes and exclamations followed by commands of "Move!" in a harsh tone that both parents instantly recognized. They widened and turned behind them hoping to finally see her…and she wasn't there. Where was it coming from? They looked all around them. Kiku tapped on their shoulders, pointing up above…where another smaller balcony was located. He whispered to them: "The guards just told us she sneaked up there."

What was that girl trying to do? The parents had to practically hang from the rail to be able to look up. Friedrich laughed and wobbled his hands to one of his eldest sisters, being able to finally see her.

She wore the dress they had insisted on, long, the red fabric breezing with this tall wind magnificently. With the sun and the gold on it, she shone like another of the jewels on the castle…although Ludwig had something against the way she just… perked her leg up on the rail, revealing her leg like this to the entire kingdom.

"Uh…Cara?" Feliciano shyly called her.

"We are proof of success," Isabella decided to continue, loud and echoing. The parents were startled at first, but silenced and let her continue. The girl spread her arms, "we are proof that it should go on, that we are to be recipients in their call…no matter what it is." There was a shake in that last part of her words. "We will shine on! We will give, travel, work, unite, play, create, paint, sing, be brave, powerful, trusting and above all, love." The relief in that last word made Feliciano smile. He was teaching her well. "We are Hearts, we are this new world and let us celebrate in freedom and chance!" And she made the crowds feast and excite, in chants and belief as if they were setting off to battle yet again.

Kiku, Ludwig and Feliciano really hoped not! One big war in their lifetime was enough and it wasn't something they wished for their children or grandchildren or anyone else that would come after them.

"Your majesties, she is not done yet," one guard informed them.

What? Her speech was already fantastic, there wasn't a need for more. But Isabella didn't hesitate to show that she had magic herself.

No…no, no, no, no, no!

That fire in her veins, that pulse, that call…Feliciano and Isabella could almost hear Augusta chuckling in some distance.

"Oh no…" Feliciano worded…defeated. Ludwig groaned, but just…let it happen.

There was a blow, a large array of sparks that blew all the way to the skies, in shining reds and golds that came down as a sort of gift. It was beautiful and spectacular, Isabella the lighthouse to shine it across her kingdom. It intensified the emotions all throughout…and it was all at the cost of an early power activation.

"What's going on?" Ludwig growled between his teeth at Analiese. The girl smiled and stood with that carefreeness that was much like her Italian father, but not even Feliciano could stand with that ease currently.

She at least answered, "Oh, I thought you had already noticed." As if it was obvious.

"What is going on?" Ludwig demanded more harshly.

Analiese groaned but knew well to answer this time. "It's part of a bet we have going on."

"A bet! What could you possibly be betting on?"

"Who inherited the power of Augusta."

Started as young children, the influence of hearing her stories constantly…along with how their father was some great hero that saved all four kingdoms while he was bearing Heinrich and Alessandro with a power that they knew was inheritable.

"Before you blame me, it was Alessandro that started it…but it was Heinrich's idea when he noticed that their activation was not like yours or Vatti's." The way she smiled, confident, completely unfazed…it meant she was involved.

"Analiese…did you go through an early power activation too?" Feliciano glared. And for once she hesitated, shaking, her ethereal look revolving her back to the young teenager she still was.

"Heinrich said mine wasn't like yours either," she thought if she included her older brother, the fault and punishment would be more spread about and she wouldn't be the only one to deal with it.

"Very well done I must admit, dear," Mariana giggled next to her, knowing full well there wouldn't be an easy exit for her friend.

Both parents groaned. "Do any of you understand how dangerous this is?" Ludwig angered.

“We’ve managed,” she meekly tried to defend.

“No! No! This is something that neither of you should treat like a game! It’s something we have to be involved in to help. You don’t understand how hard the consequences can be. I suffered many burns and had to deal with a welling of pain that was too much to bear sometimes.” He went on, leaving only Analiese to deal with this, three of her younger siblings still wide eyed and with sparkles in their eyes at what Isabella created…but also thinking…can we do this too? Feliciano sighed in desperation. They did not need to involve the younger ones either. They had to arrange something to talk about it to all of them before any unnecessary power activations.

Isabella came to join them, confident in her steps, smiling and surely mocking how Analiese was the one receiving the harsh beration.

“And you, Fräulein,” Ludwig turned to her ready to start.

“Look! Look! It’s the blimp!” Aldrich suddenly shouted, pointing to the distance.

“It’s Alessandro and Heinrich!” Giovanna joined with utter glee, the parents worried she would jump off from the balcony to hurry to them. Of course they had to follow their gaze… it had been months since they had last seen their twins and the excitement was above whatever they were scolding their kids for.

The blimp was large, red of course, with ribbons, flags and shields of the Hearts Kingdom, its shadow large enough to cover whole blocks in the city. Of course the crowds shouted and moved at its coming proximity, especially when they finally noticed where exactly the princes were located.

Heinrich was safely inside the gondola, waving through the clear glass, beside the captain, surely learning how it worked. Both parents were surprised he wasn't driving the thing himself. Alessandro on the other hand…was not safe inside…he was in fact outside, right on the envelope, the only thing keeping him from falling to the far ground was his hold on one of the many decorating ribbons. Yet he laughed, he shouted and screamed their welcome, waving to his parents with utter glee, surely with infinite stories to tell that would fill their conversations for the next weeks.

Ludwig and Feliciano couldn't bother for anything else, they smiled to themselves, waving and wanting nothing more than to already hold both in their arms. Ludwig wrapped an arm around Isabella, bringing her close, the girl cuddling well on his side. Feliciano did the same with Analiese, landing a kiss on the top of her head. The girls grinned between one another over the clear that formed for now.

There would be time for everything else, let them celebrate, let them enjoy, let them be in their now, in their family.

Feliciano took a glimpse of one of the sparks Isabella had created, one glinting from a corner of the castle, remaining still. He gazed strongly at it, because in that simple spark, he could already see a lot.

Of course, certo…Isabella inherited Augusta's power. He chuckled. Sure, he had three more kids that needed to go through a power activation as well…but in that simplicity he already knew.

This was going to be interesting.

Isabella will one day harbor the power well, with years of practice and training, a master that would be known well across the four kingdoms. And one day she will meet an engineer, a girl from the Spanish province, a girl to drive her head as insane as it had driven Ludwig and Feliciano in love. A romance will bloom, with energy and beauty. From it, a family, a granddaughter named Dorotea, with a mark of Kingship to announce who will be next after Ludwig. Of course she will be raised in the castle, of course the grandparents will be there every step of the way, with the same love they showed their children and the rest of their grandkids.

Then there will be another baby girl in the German province named Gwendoline, born with the Queen mark, and she will arrive shy, scared of every fine decoration, hesitant of her every step and unbelieving of any potential when the Queen before her was Feliciano the Great. And Feliciano will be reminded of himself at her age when he entered those very doors, with the same doubts, unbeknown of all that was to come.

He will smile, bring the girl in the warmest hug he could give and assure her that she will be great.

Fine/Ende

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I know I'm updating so late, but I have been busy with many things and-OH MY FUCKING GOD I FINISHED IT! I FINISHED IT!!!! AAAA

From the halls and libraries of the University of Puerto Rico, my own home in Bayamon, Puerto Rico. This story was on my mind the very first time I went to Europe, alive in every city I went to, the trip fuling ideas and later new dreams. This story was with me when my father left the island for a better job to support us…but then it wasn't enough and we had to go to our grandparents. I then wrote chapters in the hills of Comerio, Puerto Rico. This story was with me when hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico, a devastation that destroyed the island…and then later my family. This story was an escape through my parent's divorce. I remember using all the charge I could get on my laptop to specifically write chapters for this story. It was for these three months of living without electricity, of having to scrape for food and I still remember a tearful day where I didn't know how my grandmother and I were going to tell our family we couldn't find water to drink. And then I went to Germany. I wrote chapters in a cute little German village in Hessen. And then in Iceland, in a lonely valley where in the nights the Northern Lights would shine. In Between writing chapters and papers, I finished my bachelors. I wrote chapters in a small town in Piemonte, Italy, surrounded by wine and hazelnut fields, as well as constant lovely views of the alps. I wrote chapters in Madrid, Spain. Then in Orlando, Florida, all while waiting for the right papers to bring me to the life changing chance of coming to Berlin, Germany. I lived with a German family, with the two most adorable twins that easily became my life and were the inspiration for a lot of the children in these stories. This story helped me get relief when I had to leave them, when I moved to the center of the city, when I realized I made my dream of living and working in a big city in Europe. That was more than a year ago. I wrote chapters in several places of the city and now, I wrote the very last sentence in my Prussian boyfriend's (He's German, but he has Prussian heritage, so sssshhhhhhh!!!) apartment in Moabit, Berlin.

This story stuck with me for so much and was there to witness all kinds of things. I really…can't believe it's here, finished after 6 years. I was determined to come here, but I have to admit there were several points I thought this wouldn't happen at all.

This story is a feat I'm proud of.

I want to thank every single reader, from the ones that stuck from the very beginning, to those who left half way, to those who picked it up from random, recent readers, I don't care, I thank you deeply for coming along, for making my days with your comments, to know that I could bring joy, an escape and a trip that was as magical as it was to me. I love your kudos, your bookmarks, the art was spectacular and anything you can give to this story, I treasure and take well care of it.

I'm tearing up as I write this. This was so much, and I'm just so happy.

So now, officially Feliciano and the King of Hearts has its 'The End' and I say farewell with all the love, hugs, kisses I could give it.

I might return to edit some small detailed descriptions, especially the fantastical version of Berlin, since I want to add and fix to show more of the actual city (I've been living here soon four years, I have to give this one some more accurate grace), but the story will always remain the same.

I might take forever, I am indeed busy with many things, but the rest of my stories need some more attention. I gues I can focus more on the Society of Romulus and Remus now. BUT UPDATES SHALL COME! Even if they take…years…BUT THERE'RE COMING!

Once again, thank you so much for absolutely everything.

Works inspired by this one

Feliciano y el rey de corazones de worldwidecupcake by FluffyIcePanda

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!